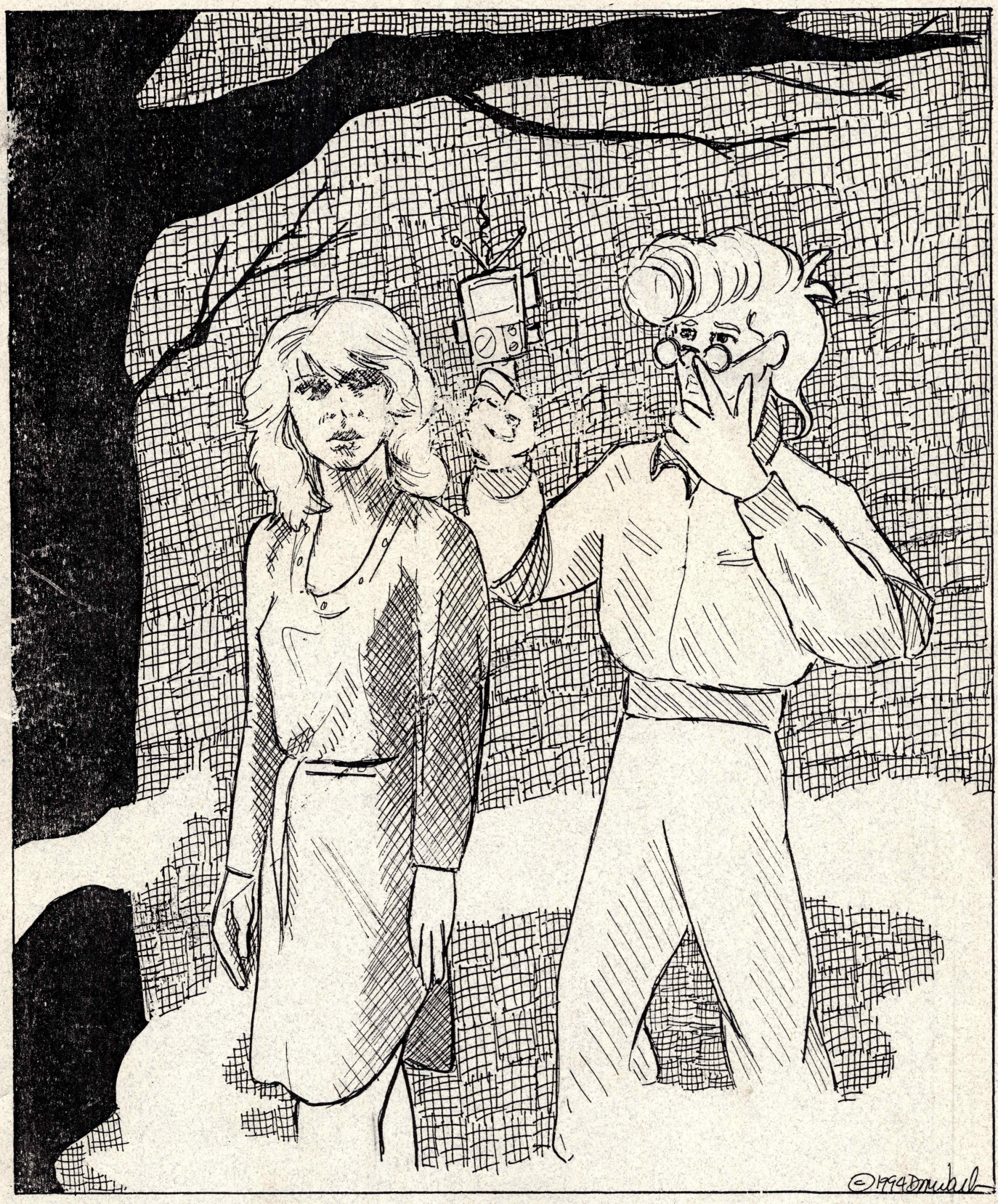
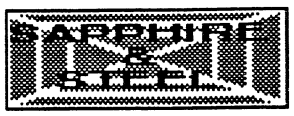


The Manifest II

Volume II



A Matter of Time

by Mary D. Bloemker

His fingers flew, swift and sure, effortlessly transforming the thoughts in his head into white characters on a glowing blue background. Words became sentences, sentences flowed into paragraphs, until, with a sense of satisfaction, he tapped the period key. Pausing a moment, he squinted at the last sentence, considered, then backspaced, replacing the last character with an exclamation point.

One final flick of his fingers saved the file to his hard disk as his other hand snagged the cordless telephone and punched a well-worn key to dial a stored number. A blast of sound interrupted the third ring. "*National Register*," a harried voice spoke above the background din.

"Alicia, *mi amore*!" Edgar Benedek crooned, juggling the receiver to his other ear. "Tell the big banana that his favorite reporter's on the phone. I'm about to fax through my latest peace offering."

There was silence on the other end of the phone, followed by a completely unexpected question. "Who's calling?"

"Who's calling?" Benny snorted. "I missed your birthday, is that it? I'll make it up to you, what kinda flowers do you like?"

"Who is this?" the voice demanded, exasperated.

The grin faded from his face. "Alicia, come on. It's me, Benny."

"Benny who?"

He pulled the receiver from his ear, staring at it as though it could give him a clue as to what was wrong. And, to his utter astonishment, it did.

"I don't own a blue phone," he muttered, turning the piece of aqua-colored plastic over in his hand, then following the cord — "Cord?" — to the base unit. He touched it gingerly, his fingers passing over the telephone number printed below the keypad. "This isn't my phone number."

A querulous voice issued from the receiver, followed by a loud *click*, ignored as Benny turned back to the screen and scanned the words glowing green on a black background. "This isn't my color scheme. This isn't my *story*," he breathed, going cold. "Princess Di? I don't do Princess Di. Where's my story? Where's ..."

He swung around in his chair, and stared open-mouthed at an apartment that wasn't his. In fact, it didn't seem to be an apartment at all. The drapes of a large bay window where there should have been two tiny casement windows were parted just enough for him to see a sedate ranch-style house a short distance away. The color scheme of the room, twice as large as his entire apartment, was tastefully coordinated, all muted blues and browns contrasted with the bright rose pattern of the drapes and sofa upholstery, and there wasn't a stick of furniture that he recognized.

He swallowed hard. "Oh, no. Not again."

The air changed around him, an abrupt cooling that sliced through him, much like the sharp, cold edge of a blade of ...

He launched out of the chair, catapulting nearly halfway across the room before spinning to face the owner of the hand he'd barely dodged from clasping his shoulder. For a moment, he could only stare, speechless, at the last person he'd ever expected to see, but should have expected all along.

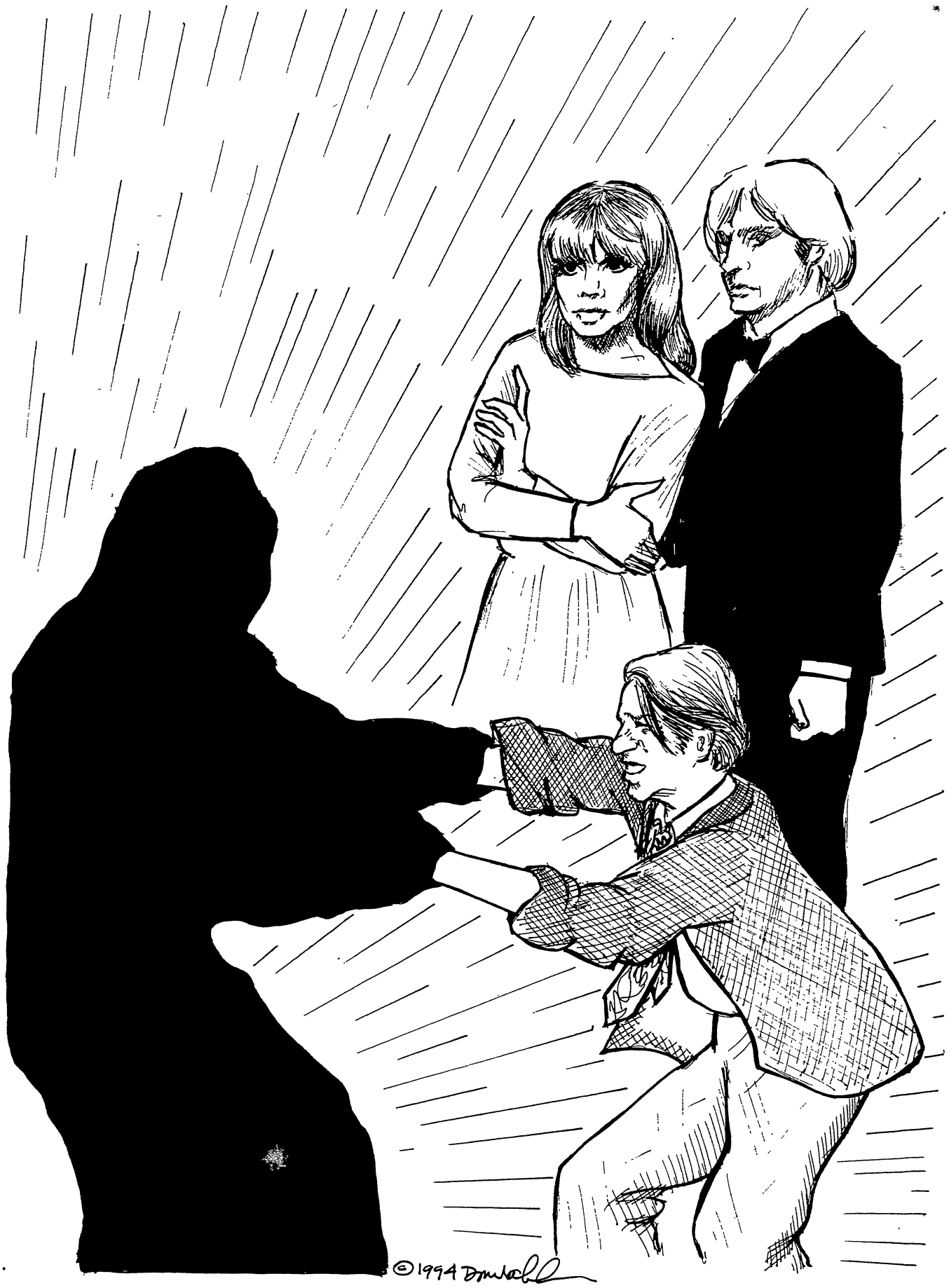
His breath came back in a short bark. "You again. Don't you ever knock?"

The newcomer took a step forward. Benny responded with two steps back. "What is it this time?" he demanded. "You've come to fix this, right?"

"Yes," the man replied stiffly, his clear gray eyes burning in a mask-like face. "I've come to fix this. And I shall start by killing you."

Benny dove to the side as the man lunged, leaping over the sofa to put it between him and his professed murderer. "Wait, wait, let's talk about this, okay? What the hell's going on around here? Why do you want to — yeow!"

The man reached down and, taking the sofa arm with one hand, tossed the piece of furniture out of his way. Benny barely escaped by ducking under the man's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rigid arm, nearly somersaulting in his desperate attempt to put the length of the room — and more — between them. In desperation, he looked for the woman who should have been there, who'd always been never less than a few yards from the side of her berserker partner.

"Where is she?" he demanded, less from curiosity than from a very real — not to mention immediate — need to appeal to a more sympathetic ear. "Where's Sapphire?"

Steel halted his advance abruptly, his head coming up to reveal gray eyes glittering with surprise and rage. It seemed to take him a moment before he could speak. "Sapphire is dead." His expression tightened dangerously. "You killed her."

"She ... I ... *what?*" Stunned, Benny barely managed to react in time; he sidestepped inches from Steel's outstretched hand and, with his pursuer shadowing his every move, began a defensive circuit of the room.

"I didn't kill anyone," Benny insisted, skirting the upended sofa. "I *swear*, I didn't kill anyone!"

"I heard her scream," Steel said, his soft voice belying the fury that suffused his face. "I felt ..."

His jaw stiffened, as though he'd suddenly become aware that he'd been on the verge of voicing a thought that he couldn't complete.

"I didn't kill her! I didn't kill anyone!" repeated Benny urgently.

"You went through the gate with her," his attacker accused with deadly finality.

A long-ago memory overwhelmed Benedek suddenly, jolting him with its clarity and emotional impact. The gate. His hand in hers, she'd led him to the gate. Her eyes glowed, brilliant blue, and the door had opened. One last protest, easily soothed, and then ...

"Yes," Benny said weakly.

"She never came out."

"No! She did, we both did. You remember ..."

"I do not."

His pace slowed as Benny sensed, with relief, that the flicker in the intruder's eyes reflected growing uncertainty. "What happened in there?" Steel demanded.

"I ... don't remember. No, I'm telling you the truth, I ... I've never been able to remember. She said it was better that way. Come on, you were there when she said it."

"She never came out," Steel snapped.

"Look, look," he croaked desperately. "Isn't it obvious? We're remembering two different things! Killing me isn't going to solve anything."

"Perhaps not," Steel replied. A small smile touched his lips, chilling in its promise. "But it will give me great pleasure."

"Mr. Benedek?"

Benny's eyes widened as, over Steel's shoulder, he saw a very welcome sight. "Sapphire!" he breathed, weak with relief. "Oh, man, am I ever glad to see you."

"Indeed," the woman replied with a smile as Steel, frowning, turned toward where Sapphire was standing at the far end of the room.

"You think me a fool?" he growled angrily.

"Could you tell him to back off?" he pleaded with her.

"Him?" she queried, glancing around in genuine confusion.

"Enough," Steel grunted, fury sparking in his eyes.

"Oh, boy," Benny squeaked, heart sinking as Steel advanced on him again.

"Mr. Benedek, are you all right?"

Her question ended in a surprised cry as Benny, feinting left, ducked under Steel's swinging arm. He grabbed the edge of the desk to deflect his trajectory and landed, hands and knees, at Sapphire's feet.

He looked up to see Steel advancing on him, with no time to regain his balance and therefore no escape. Instinctively, he raised a hand, mutely asking the woman to shield him from her implacable companion, or at least help him to his feet.

Her hand closed on his, and as he wondered at the incredible warmth of her skin, the room around him

changed again, becoming his familiar New York apartment. But more importantly, the terrible rage abruptly vanished from Steel's face.

One hand frozen in the act of reaching for Benedek's throat, Steel stood immobile, staring at the woman standing behind his erstwhile victim. When he spoke after a long moment of silence, his voice had lost all of its former belligerence, filling instead with a poignant longing. "Sapphire?"

And when she spoke, another long moment later, it was with her usual aplomb and subtle irony. "I do believe we have a problem."

"Disaster."

Steel paced angrily, ignoring Benny's wince every time his body passed through furniture that existed only in the New York apartment. Neither did it seem to disturb the man that, according to the single remark he'd made on the subject, Benny and Sapphire appeared to be seated on a non-existent futon.

Benny clung tightly to Sapphire's hand, as he had since a few moments of tentative experimentation had proved that this contact kept everyone visible and audible to everyone else. For a while, his surroundings remained stable as well, but increasingly, ghosts and shadows of that suburban living room in which Steel stalked impinged on his awareness. Sapphire frowned but said nothing when he, rubbing his aching forehead, mentioned it to her; Steel ignored him, continuing to pace and mutter.

"Utter disaster."

"I'm not sure I agree," Sapphire replied calmly. "However, I do agree that the situation is ... difficult."

"How did we become separated? Where —?" He stopped, struck by a thought. "What happened after you went through the gate?"

"Something separated us in the passage," she said, turning to Benny. "Do you remember?"

He shook his head, too confused to speak.

"Something," Steel repeated urgently. "What?"

"I don't remember, not clearly," she faltered. "I was pushed aside. There was something ... some*one*. Someone with us in the passage. It wasn't concerned with me, it merely wanted me out of the way. When I turned back, Mr. Benedek was gone. I searched for him, and found ..." Her face changed as she looked up at him. "Where are you?"

Steel drew a breath, and for a moment looked away. She gasped. "No. You didn't."

"What was I supposed to do?" he shot back defensively.

"You were supposed to guard the entrance."

"You didn't answer me." He glowered, becoming agitated. "I heard ... I heard you ... You didn't answer me."

"I didn't hear you," she admitted, her voice faint with the confusion reflected in her eyes. After a moment, she focussed on Steel again. "What did you find?"

"Another portal, leading to this place. And him."

Eyes distant, she shook her head. "You chose the wrong path."

"But ..."

"There were two portals. Two choices. They were deliberately set in place."

"By whom? Or what?"

"You know, I really hate it when you look at me like that," Benedek muttered darkly. "Look, once and for all, I'm not the one responsible for this mess."

"What caused you to break contact with Sapphire?"

"I didn't break contact with her," he insisted, exasperated.

"But you claim you remember nothing."

"Look, I remember enough, okay? I went in with her and I came out with her ..."

"No, Mr. Benedek," Sapphire interrupted him gently. "We went in together, yes. But we never left."

"We did," he said, but shock left him with no voice as he stared at Sapphire, who slowly shook her head as she continued, "We never left, Mr. Benedek. We're still there."

He tried to back away from her, but she held on tightly. "That happened nearly ten years ago," he said hoarsely, one hand pressed to his pounding head. "Ten years. Are you trying to tell me that everything that's happened ...?"

He struggled for composure. "Look, you say that we never came back through the gate. But we did, I remember that much. I ... don't remember what happened in there, though. All I know is that things were one way before we went in and ... different ... when we came back. So if we never came back, that means that ..."

He focused on Steel suddenly, his surprise at finding the man intent on his every word muted by a startling thought. "A house. A Cape Cod on Long Island," he said, voice nearly gone. He squinted, picking out the rose patterns in the living room's decor through the annoying haze of his New York perception. "She loved flowers. She ..." He started to rise, but Sapphire's firm grip kept him next to her. "She's here, isn't she?" he demanded of them in a voice that hardly dared hope.

"I wouldn't know," Steel replied, turning away.

Sapphire resisted Benny's attempt to release her hand, forcing him to face her. "This is not wise," she cautioned.

"She's here, isn't she?" he repeated slowly, leaving no doubt that he would not be dissuaded from the answer.

"Not...here," Sapphire admitted reluctantly. "But near."

"My God." Benny swallowed in a dry throat. "My God. That's what's happening, isn't it? She didn't ... she never ..."

"Mr. Benedek ..."

He yanked free and was off the futon before Sapphire could stop him. Steel eyed him warily as Sapphire disappeared from his perception and Benedek discovered and approached the elaborately framed photo collage above the entertainment center.

Reaching up, he touched the glass, fingers lightly tracing details that brought to him, one by one, stunning revelations. A couple in formal wedding pose; the same woman, reclining in bed, looking tired but happy as she cradled two infants. The same babies yawning sleepily in a stroller, opening presents under a decorated tree under the beaming smiles of the erstwhile bride and groom. The same toddlers riding a merry-go-round, the same youngsters posing self-consciously in matching suits and ties for grammar school photographs.

His fingers lingered on the luminescent face of the happy bride. "Denise," he breathed.

"Mr. Benedek."

The photos wavered before his eyes. "No!" he cried, pulling away from Sapphire's touch. "No, let me ... I want to see this. Please."

"This is not wise," she repeated softly, firmly.

"I have a wife," he said, his breath coming in strained gasps. "I have children, I have a house on Long Island, I have ..."

"Benny."

"Denise." He shook his head wonderingly as he stared at the photos. "I have ... everything I wanted."

"Do you?" Sapphire asked softly.

He turned to her, gray-faced. "This is real, isn't it?"

She reacted to the plaintive note in his voice, lowering her eyes. "Yes. This is real. But it's not right."

"No," he murmured, an instinctive protest from his heart. It had to be right. He stared up at the photos again. Everything he'd ever wanted was depicted there, and in more than half the photos, it was his beaming face next to Denise's. The way it should have been all along. The way it would have been if ...

"Why can't it be right? Who would it hurt?" He looked at her pleadingly. "*Who* would it *hurt*?"

She didn't reply, but he found the answer in her eyes.

"Oh, God," he groaned, turning away.

Steel stood silent nearby, hearing only Benny's side of the conversation and growing increasingly impatient. "I must speak with Sapphire," he said as Benny collapsed onto the futon, aching head held in his shaking hands.

"Go to hell," Benny muttered wearily.

He didn't look up as Steel approached him, belatedly realizing that given the man's stated intention for coming here in the first place, ignoring him wasn't necessarily a wise thing to do. "I will speak with Sapphire now," the man said in a low, controlled voice. "Her way — or my way."

Benny scowled up at him, flinching away when Steel raised his hand. "Okay, okay, back off." His gaze shifted to the woman who had taken a step closer to him in concern. "He wants to talk to you," he sighed, holding out his hand to her.

Any other time Benny might have been intrigued by the subtle change that came over Steel's face when Sapphire appeared before him again. A softening, as though a raw edge had been tempered, smoothed over. He wondered vaguely, and not for the first time, if their peculiar relationship was born not of practicality but of mutual need.

"Why?" Steel demanded. "Why is this happening?"

"I don't know," she admitted with a sigh. "I can't even guess."

"These choices must be the key to understanding this riddle."

"I agree." She tugged gently on Benny's hand to request his attention. "I know this will be difficult for you to believe and understand. All I ask is that you trust me. Please."

He nodded mutely, bringing a warm smile to her face. "We are still in the passage, beyond the gate," she told him. "Someone has shown you two paths, two directions that your life could take. I exist in one, Steel exists in the other. Both are real, but neither belong to you. Not yet, anyway."

"Not yet?" he echoed weakly.

"We went beyond the gate to find the cause of the breach. And we did that because you told us that you knew the plane would never arrive. But it did arrive. I saw it. Steel saw it. You did not."

She tightened her grip on his hand when he stiffened. "The gate didn't open for you, it opened for me. The breach couldn't have been affecting you at that point. How did you know?"

"I — I just knew," he faltered.

"No," she said firmly. "Someone told you."

He shook his head, causing her to repeat more firmly, "Someone told you, Mr. Benedek. Who? Who told you the plane would never arrive?"

"No one," he gasped. "I swear, I ... I don't remember ... I just knew ..."

Her fingers brushed the side of Benny's face as she spoke. He watched, open-mouthed, as her eyes filled with a soft, pulsing blue light. Dimly, he heard Steel speak his partner's name in a tone of warning tinged with deep concern, but the blue light grew stronger and swept the man from Benny's awareness as it carried him to another place within his own mind.

Mr. Benedek.

He turned, nearly colliding with an elderly woman struggling with a suitcase. Sending her on her way with a quick, graciously accepted apology, he glanced around again, decided that he'd mis-heard the page and returned his attention to the array of monitors on the wall above him. Departures and arrivals glowed steadily on the screens as he scanned quickly for the specific flight.

And as he stared, the notation next to that flight flickered noticeably. ON TIME became DELAYED. Then oddly, switched back to ON TIME.

Mr. Benedek?

His head came up as he frowned in confusion. That wasn't a public-address system page. That was a voice inside his own head.

Show me the beginning.

"Here," he said, not knowing to whom he spoke but knowing, somehow, that this was the answer the voice requested. "It began here. The arrival information kept changing."

Show me more.

He didn't move, but suddenly he was no longer on the concourse. He stood near the closed gate, hovering near the flight desk at the fringe of a tense, frightened crowd.

He knew. The others only suspected, but he knew. Their long wait would ultimately be in vain. The gate before them would never open.

How did you know?

"I just ... knew," he whispered.

Who told you?

"No one. No one. I ...."

The voice grew stern and insistent. *Who told you?*

"No one ..." He trailed off as he opened his eyes. The gate was open. Weary-looking people emerged from the boarding tube, some gliding into welcoming arms, other trudging on past him.

He stared in disbelief. "This ... isn't ..."

How did you know? The voice spoke urgently. *Who told you?*

The gate was closed. Someone in the quiet crowd around him began to weep.

"No one!" he insisted. "No one told me! I just knew. I knew because ..."

His breath caught as the memory returned with the force of a sledgehammer. He knew even before he spun around that it would be there.

A shadow. Just a shadow, like a badly remembered dream. Vaguely man-shaped, its core was utter darkness, radiating undulating prismatic waves of such brilliance that he recoiled with one arm shielding his eyes.

"No!" he shrieked, scrambling backward to cower against a support beam. "Get away from me!"

What is it? Why do you fear it?

"Get it away!" He cringed as the darkness spread, swallowing all light in its path. With a shrill cry, he tried to scramble to his feet, but the concrete beam beneath his shoulder dissolved as the shadow reached out to envelope him, sending him sprawling.

"It's all right," a voice soothed as gentle hands pried his fingers from his face. "You're safe. You're safe."

He opened his eyes to ... nothing. The airport concourse was gone. Everything around him was silent, still; gray. But something held him securely by the shoulders and when he turned his head, it was to see Sapphire's welcoming smile.

"What —?" He swallowed hard, looking around frantically. Then he remembered. The passage. He was in that damned passage, surrounded once more by its surreal nothingness.

His heart lodged in his throat as he accepted the hand Sapphire offered him to help him to his feet. "You were right, weren't you? I never left here. It was all ..."

"A choice," she finished, steadying him on his feet.

"Why?" he managed after a moment.

"A very good question, indeed." Steel emerged from the gloom, his expression inscrutable. He gestured briefly with his hand. "It would seem that your sudden awareness of the inviability of the time pockets was enough to destroy them. Or perhaps, as I more strongly suspect, their purpose has been fulfilled. The portals are gone."

"Ten years," Benny said numbly, unable to release the grip he kept on Sapphire's hand. "All those books I wrote. The kids' birthday parties ..." He squeezed his eyes shut as the disparate memories assailed him, vying for prominence. "None of it was real?"

"On the contrary," Sapphire told him. "In a way that I cannot hope to explain to you, you did indeed live both lives. When you stepped through the portal, you entered your own future. The person you are now joined with the person you will be in that time and place, so it was as if you had lived that life. Both were very real, Mr. Benedek. But you can choose only one. And the choice must be made here."

"Why?" he pleaded. "Why is this happening? Why do I have to make a choice? Why can't my life just happen the way it's supposed to?"

"A question I would very much like answered," Steel said quietly.

"Someone does know the answer," Sapphire commented after a moment spent silently helping Benny to calm down. "The someone who told you that the plane would never arrive."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Benny asked wearily, rubbing his eyes. "I keep telling you, I just knew. That's all. I just ..."

"There was a shadow," she reminded. "It frightened you."

The memory caused his breath to catch in his throat. "No ..."

"Why did it frighten you?"

"It ..." Unable to speak, he shook his head violently.

"Why did it frighten you?"

"It wasn't a shadow!" he blurted.

"What, then?"

"I ... don't know." Her words pulled at him, tugging insistently at something he didn't want to see, didn't want to set free and he clenched his teeth with the effort it took him to resist. "I don't know ..."

"Why did it frighten you? Did it threaten you?"

"No. Yes!"

"Does it want to cause you harm?"

"Yes," he choked, but then shook his head. "No."

"Did it hurt you?"

"Yes." Head drooping, he clung to her hand with both of his, utterly drained. "Yes."

She placed the fingers of her free hand under his chin, gently forcing him to meet her soft, blue eyes. "The memory is nearly gone. Only the shadow remains," she whispered, understanding. "And the pain."

"Sapphire."

Steel's voice, sharp with warning, drew her attention away. Sick and disoriented, it took a moment for Benny to realize what they were reacting to.

Sapphire grabbed his arm as he recoiled with a ragged gasp, pulling him into a fierce, protective embrace. "No," she whispered urgently near his ear. "It won't harm you. Please."

He strained to break free, but she held fast until his panic subsided and his head dropped to rest against her shoulder. "Look past the pain," she urged him softly. "You already know that it hurt you. Now you must discover why. You must," she cajoled when a shudder marked his protest.

He straightened with an effort, but when she silently prodded him to turn around, his courage failed. She waited until his eyes opened again, then placed her hands on either side of his face. "Do you know why it seeks you?"

"No," he managed hoarsely.

"Do you know how it caused you pain?"

"I ... I'm not sure."

"Do you know how it caused you pain?" she pressed.

"I ... I'm ... yes." He gasped for air. "Yes."

"Benny." She forced him once again to meet her eyes. "Listen to me. This is very important. You must find out. You must discover why it did this to you."

He shook his head helplessly. "How?"

"Ask."

She anticipated his violent response, holding him still until he stopped shaking. "Ask," she repeated, more urgently. "Don't you understand? Everything that's happened to you here depends on the answer. You must know if your pain was caused by the truth ... or a lie."

He stopped breathing for a moment. It hadn't occurred to him until that moment that a choice might be involved. The realization washed all fear from him like a cold flood of water, giving him the courage to turn around and face the pulsing shadow that waited patiently for him.

"What are you?" he demanded, voice nearly gone.

He flinched as the apparition answered him, but Sapphire's grip on his arm kept him still. There was no voice, not even recognizable sound. A cacophony of eerie tones assailed his ears, meaningless.

But unthreatening. He forced his squeezed-shut eyes open, reluctantly staring once more into the vague shadow, a dark amorphous shape in the gray nothingness. And listened.

"It needs help," he realized in growing wonder.

Steel looked at him sharply, narrow-eyed. "How so?"

"I — I'm not sure. You can hear it, can't you?" he begged Sapphire.

She shook her head apologetically.

"Are you quite certain?" Steel demanded.

"I ... I don't ..."

The eerie wail rose plaintively and the shadow's extremities rippled, very much like someone reaching out in supplication.

"Yes," Benny said faintly, unable to take his eyes from the apparition. "I'm sure."

"Then will you?" Sapphire asked quietly, without inflection. "Will you offer it the help you believe it needs?"

Benny stared at the specter, overwhelmed by a sudden surge of fear. "What if I'm wrong? What if it doesn't need help, what if this is only a trick?"

"You must choose according to your own conscience," Sapphire told him.

He drew air into aching lungs, and shook his head helplessly. "I don't know," he groaned. "I don't know what the right choice is."

"I believe you do," she replied confidently.

He stopped short of reflexively disagreeing with her. She was right, after all. He did know. There was something about this place, this situation, that wouldn't allow him to turn his back on someone ... *something* ... in need as he might have done in the real world. If it were indeed a trick, even if he died some horrible death as a result, at least his conscience would be clear.

He lunged forward before resurgent fear had a chance to kick the decision aside. The apparition before him raised its arms; in defense or joy, Benny couldn't tell and didn't much care. He grabbed and connected with something warm, rough-textured and very solid. A shrill sound, like the protest of a thousand taut wires struck at once, pounded in his ears as he pulled against a great weight. Something grabbed his arm as Benny strained, somehow knowing that the thing he was attempting to drag forward wanted very much to help, but was being restrained by an almost equal force pulling in the opposite direction.

The cacophony seemed to resolve slightly, or perhaps it was only the ringing in his ears. In strident, sweeping multi-tones he thought he heard the words *"... help ... me ..."*

"I'm trying!" he gasped, gritting his teeth and pulling harder. At last he felt some give, abrupt as though his opposite number's grip had suddenly slipped.

Benny stumbled back, and the burden to which he clung came with him. His backward motion was checked by contact with something solid — Steel, who kept Benny on his feet by grabbing his arms and holding on until his legs steadied beneath him.

"Thanks," Benny said breathlessly, less bewildered by the exertion than he was by the rescue.

Sapphire came forward, going to her knees at the side of the thing ... the *man* ... that Benny had pulled from the depths of the shadow. He lay still where he had fallen, sprawled face down. Clad in a charcoal gray suit badly marred by dark stains and tears, the man's shoes were missing and his bare feet bore the scars of wounds both old and recent.

Without fear, Sapphire reached over to brush long, tangled hair from the man's face. Her eyes widened as a soft gasp escaped her lips.

"Silver."

Steel released Benny, coming forward to stare down at the man as Sapphire gently cradled his head in her hands. "Silver?" he repeated with soft incredulity. "What's he doing here?"

Sapphire's anguished expression deepened as she carefully pressed her fingers to the injured man's forehead, then traced a slow, gentle path to his temple. "He's not supposed to be here," she whispered.

"That's part of the question, not the answer."

"No," she said sharply. "I mean, he's not supposed to be here, not at all. Not with us, not now."

Steel frowned, troubled. "Are you saying ...?"

"Yes."

"But that's impossible."

"You know it's not."

"It's impossible for *him*," Steel snapped impatiently. "He doesn't know how. He doesn't have the training."

"But that doesn't mean that he can't."

"Why would he?" Steel insisted. "Why would he do something so ... so mind-numbingly stupid?"

"Why ... indeed?" The question came in a broken whisper from the man whose eyes fluttered open, and blinked hard several times to focus on the face above him. "Hello, my dear. As lovely as ever, I see."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Steel demanded, glowering down at Silver.

"And as obdurate as ever," he sighed, the words catching in his throat. A small coughing fit suddenly became a spasm, and Sapphire held him tightly until it passed.

"Easy," she soothed. "Easy."

Steel dropped to a crouch, waiting until Silver opened his eyes again. "You're a fool."

"It's good to see you, too," the man rasped, mustering a faint smile.

"You shouldn't be here," Steel insisted.

"You're hurt," Sapphire said, catching one of Silver's hands to study, aghast, the rash of scars and unhealed wounds covering his skin. The dark stains covering large areas of his ravaged clothing bore mute testimony to the fact that his injuries were extensive.

"A few scratches," he demurred.

"You're bleeding."

"I suppose I am."

"You're an idiot," Steel snorted.

"If you say so, it must be true," Silver replied, unperturbed.

She gasped softly. It seemed to take her a few moments before she could bring herself to speak and when she did, it was in a barely audible voice. "You're dying."

He closed his eyes with a quiet sigh. "Yes. I know."

"You must go back."

"No. No, I'm afraid that's quite out of the question."

"But if you don't ..."

"But," he said sharply, gasping for air at the effort it cost him. When he could speak again, he continued, "But ... if I do, I'll die anyway. They're waiting for me, you see."

"Who?" Steel demanded. "Who is waiting for you?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't remember."

"How could you not?"

"Symptomatic, I suppose. I'm doing well to remember who I am, let alone who you are."

"Entropic effects of displacement," Sapphire informed Steel grimly. "Memory is invariably adversely affected."

"Can you help him remember?" Steel asked, displeased.

"I'm not certain," she hesitated.

"I'd prefer you didn't, then," Silver interjected. "Entropy ... I don't remember what that means, but it doesn't sound like an experience that should be shared."

"Do you at least remember if those who are waiting for you did this to you?"

"I do remember that much, yes. The answer is no. I may not remember who they are, but I do have a vague recollection that they have no patience for such ... subtleties."

"Then how did this happen?"

Silver remained silent, his watery eyes moving to deliver a steady, inscrutable stare to a point above and to his left. "Curiously, that much I do remember."

Sapphire looked up to follow the direction of Silver's gaze and found herself staring at a pale and shaken Edgar Benedek.

"How can this be?" she demanded, voice soft with incredulous horror.

Silver touched her arm. "It wasn't his fault," he assured her. "It was mine, entirely mine. I knew what the risks were. I accepted the consequences."

Steel began to pace silently, hands clasped behind his back. Sapphire's eyes burned angrily as she continued to stare at Benny. "Tell me what happened. Tell me."

"It was him," Benny said in a voice that surprised him with what little strength it held. "He was the one who told me. I remember now. He said that I'd be given a chance to choose. But the choice ... he said the choice itself was only a trick. A trick to keep me from making the right choice."

"Why did you hurt him?" she flared.

"He didn't," Silver sighed. "I told you, I knew what the risks were when I attempted to cross a barrier without the proper training."

The returning memory drew deep lines into Benny's ashen face. "I thought he was ill, I tried to get him to a hospital, but he wouldn't let me near him. Every time he tried to say something, it was like ... like something was hitting him, or ..."

Sapphire's fingers went white where they clutched Silver's torn and bloodied sleeve. "To have suffered this much injury ..."

"I was quite persistent," he told her, mustering a wan smile.

"And then he told me what the choices were and ... I didn't want to listen anymore."

Steel spoke in the silence. "Someone has gone to a great deal of effort to effect a choice at this particular point in time. Why?" He focused his attention on Benny. "What is so important about your life, here? Now? What is it about you that has caused some of the most destructive forces of the universe to come against you?"

"Not against him," Silver interjected, as gently as he would correct a child. "Against *you*."

Steel turned, demanding sharply, "What else do you remember, then?"

"Gently," Sapphire said, a command to her partner.

"He knows more than he's telling."

"He's telling all that he knows." Sapphire held his gaze until he turned away with an impatient snort.

Silver lifted his hand to give the one she held against his face a grateful pat. "Thank you, my dear. Your faith, as ever, sustains me."

"If we are the target, why has this man been drawn into this?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. But he is important. To you."

"How?" Steel demanded, at patience's end.

"I don't remember," he insisted wearily.

"But you expect us to trust what you say."

"He's risked his life to come here," Sapphire pointed out, her voice holding a hard edge.

"He says."

"The injuries are real."

"The explanation is suspect."

"I believe him."

"Believe what you will." Steel turned his back, effectively ending the argument.

Silver convulsed with a dry, hacking cough. Benny watched Sapphire's face as she held the man's shoulders until the spasm subsided and his head dropped weakly back into her lap. The surprising emotion he'd heard in her voice flickered like a fire in her eyes as, with her fingers, she traced the half-healed wounds marking his face.

"Why have you done this?" she asked softly.

He stirred, opening bloodshot eyes that seemed unable to focus, and somehow managed a smile. "For you," he rasped in a voice meant to tell her that the answer should have been obvious.

"Why?" she insisted.

"The choice, you see. He wouldn't have known there was a choice at all. I had to tell him."

"We were assigned."

"Because of me," he said, pronouncing each word with extra care, as though to assure her that there was no reason for the distress that quavered faintly in her voice. "Their plan ... oh, my dear, I tell you — it was brilliant. You would have never known, never even suspected. I had to do it, if just to draw your attention. Don't you see?"

She shook her head and he reacted with an exasperated sound. "They had no intention of actually giving him a choice. *They* opened the gate. A small breach, open for such a short time. He would have never known; *you* would have never known until it was much too late. That's why I had to tell him. And that's what drew you here — my interference, not the breach itself."

"He saw the gate as closed," Sapphire said, confused.

"Yes. After I told him that was what he *must* see."

"He's right." Benny spoke faintly, lost in the sudden rush of conflicting memories. "They'd already made the announcement. People were crying. I ... didn't ... I had no idea ..." He swallowed hard, his eyes widening in sudden horror. "I didn't know. I didn't know it was going to happen."

"Go on," Sapphire urged as Steel ended his measured pacing to listen intently.

"I remember standing there, thinking that it just couldn't be true. Couldn't be. Someone was wrong, it was all some horrible mistake, or ... or someone was playing some kind of sick joke. I'd spent all that time waiting for the door to open, and now they were saying it never would. But they had to be wrong. If they'd just go over there and open the door, they'd have to see that they were wrong. Just open it, and then everything will be all right and we can all go home and have a good laugh ..."

He trailed off, lowering his head for the moment it took him to regain his composure and put some distance between himself and the memory threatening to overwhelm him. "I thought I heard someone call my name," he said in a lower, calmer voice. "I turned and ... there was someone standing by the gate. He was smiling at me. Smiling. Kinda like he knew that I hadn't fallen for the joke."

The insight drained strength from his voice for a moment, and a quick exchange of glances with Sapphire told him that she hadn't missed it, either. "What then?" she prodded gently.

"He opened the door."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Steel demanded coldly in the heavy silence that followed Benny's whispered words.

"I expect he didn't remember it until just now," Silver offered. "My fault, I fear. There was no time for subtlety."

"You took back time?"

"Just a few seconds," he demurred to Sapphire's sharp accusation. "Less effort than you might think, since I merely took advantage of the distortion effect caused by their manipulations. As you can see, I caused no permanent reversal, but it did keep him from accepting their invitation, as it were. Long enough for me to assure him that it was a trick, that the gate had to stay closed. Long enough to get your attention."

"When we arrived, the gate was open," Steel pointed out.

"Clever of them, don't you think? Persuade you to believe that the lie was the reality and his perception the falsehood, and you'd deliver him exactly where they wanted him. Such delicious irony."

"Clever," Steel echoed, unconvinced. "But you insist that we are the target, not him. If you would have us believe that you speak the truth, then your clever explanation fails the most critical test. It does not explain why."

Silver drew a deep breath, his eyes closing briefly. "I've already told you, I don't remember why," he sighed, defeated. "I'm sorry."

"Clever," Steel sniffed.

"How can you be so obtuse?" Silver flared, body and voice trembling with passion. "Think, man. *Think.* Your paths have crossed before. You *know* what the correct choice must be. I'm not lying to you. I'm trying to *help* you, you stubborn idiot."

Sapphire soothed him back when his voice shattered into a moan of pain. Shaken, Steel turned his back on them once more, remaining silent.

"That's not all I remember," Benny said suddenly, raising his head to reveal his gray, haggard face. "I remember why you thought Sapphire was dead."

Silver made a sharp noise, followed by an unconvincing coughing fit, successfully distracting Sapphire. But Steel's attention remained intent on Benny as the muscles of his face tightened. "Why?"

"You know, it's really not wise to ..." Silver rasped.

"Because she was."

Sapphire and Steel exchanged alarmed glances as Silver deflated with a groan. Steel took a step forward, lifting one hand. "Tell me."

"Don't do it," Silver said quickly.

Benny rocked slightly, straining to resolve the fractured memory. "She took me to the wrong portal. Not the one they wanted me to choose. She stood in their way." His voice dropped to an anguished whisper. "And ... that's why they killed her."

"Who?" Steel demanded. "Who did this?"

Benny folded his arms tightly across his chest. "I don't remember faces. Just ... shadows. They pulled me away. I saw ..." His breathing stopped as widened eyes stared at nothing. "They ... I saw them ..."

"Tell me."

"Don't!" Silver interjected forcefully as Benny physically recoiled from the memory. "Steel, please. Don't. It's not that important. Please."

"What happened after that?" Steel continued after a moment in which his gaze went from Silver to the top of Sapphire's bowed head.

"I'm ... I'm not sure. I'd been ... I dunno. *Living* is the word, I guess. I'd been living that other life and then they came for me and then they ... she ..." He gasped in a breath, swallowing hard. "Then I was in the other life, but still remembering the other one and ... that's when you found me. That's all I know. I swear."

"Someone pushed me," Sapphire said softly, without inflection. "That's all. Someone pushed me."

Silver tightened his grip on her hand. "My apologies," he whispered. "Unconscionably rude, I know, but I assure you it was quite necessary."

When Sapphire spoke again, it was in a quiet voice filled with the same wonder that shone in her eyes. "You took back time ... *twice*."

"And gained considerable respect for your matchless abilities in the bargain, I might add," he smiled.

"And why have they not tried again?" Steel wanted to know.

"The same reason you've both remained unharmed despite the fact that they would like nothing more than to see you dead. Me. I'm the cork in the bottle, as it were. And they are not pleased about the situation at all."

"What are you saying?" Steel demanded tensely.

"I'm saying that you're running out of time." Silver paused, eyes closing tightly. When he opened them again, slowly, the light in them had dimmed and his hoarsened voice reflected his weakened condition. "This place is safe for you only as long as I'm here. You must leave now, quickly. Take him with you. Stay with him. Make certain he doesn't remember what happened here. Tell him ... tell him anything that you think will make sense. And make very, very sure that no one attempts to open the gate for him. Not that I think they'll be foolish enough to try again ..."

"I can't leave you like this," Sapphire protested.

"You can't stay and I can't go with you," he insisted firmly. "Please, don't argue with me. I know what I'm doing. This way, we all have a chance."

"You said there was none for you."

"There could be," he said, unable to suppress an uncertain stammer. "There could be. They're bound to be distracted by this failure, so if I'm quick enough ..."

"No."

"You must."

"No."

"You *must*," he whispered. "Steel, please. Take them from here. Take them, now."

"*No*."

"For pity's sake, don't let me have done this for nothing!" he exploded.

There was silence broken only by three of Silver's labored breaths; then:

"Sapphire."

Steel stood ramrod straight and still, but his tone of voice was as eloquent and commanding as any physical gesture. Sapphire remained motionless, her head bowed, eyes closed, face averted from the steady gaze Silver kept fixed on her. Then, reluctantly, she gently shifted Silver's head and shoulders from her lap, and rose to join her companion.

Silver reached over with some effort and yanked on Benny's sleeve, distracting him from his interested study of the pair who stood close, but not touching; face to face but looking past each other; utterly silent yet still appearing to be in earnest conversation. "Listen to me," he begged in a whisper. "Remember this if you can. I regret that your life has been so ruthlessly and maliciously violated and if there had been anything I could have done to prevent it, I would have. Please, believe that."

Benny's throat constricted as he remembered what waited for him, what he would be forced to face without the confusion of portals or timeslips or breaches. What this stranger, appearing so abruptly at his side as he'd stared at the open gate, had told him had to happen. He'd forced Benny to see the truth behind the compelling lie, and had insisted he believe the truth despite the tricks his senses — and his heart — kept playing on him.

"I just want to know one thing," Benny said, voice tight with anger and grief. "Why. Tell me why. You owe me that much. Just tell me why."

Silver drew in a deep breath, then held it, his resolute expression faltering under the full impact of the raw emotion in Benny's eyes. Releasing his breath in a sigh, he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"There's a reason they've chosen you as their pawn," Silver continued in the same soft, sympathetic voice when Benny, thin-lipped, looked away. "I can't tell you what that reason is, only that in time, you'll come to know for yourself. I pray that you will find the reason as compelling as I did." He paused, eyes shining, before continuing in a fainter voice, "And I also hope that, when that time comes ... you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Come." Sapphire's hands closed on Benny's shoulders, startling him out of his intention to demand that Silver explain his strange words.

"Go," Silver said when Benny looked back at him, about to protest. "Right now they can only find me. When you pulled me through into this place, I effectively blocked their way to you. If you wait much longer, you'll only give them the time they need to remove the obstacle."

Benny's eyes narrowed as he resisted Sapphire's attempt to lead him away. "That's why ... You *didn't* need help, did you?" he realized.

A spark briefly lit Silver's dull eyes. "Get him out of here," he told Sapphire with a tired, dismissive gesture.

Steel reached over to take Benny's other arm when he again balked. He glanced between them, assessed their impassive expressions. Then, too exhausted to fight and unable to think of a single reason he would want to, he acquiesced with a nod, and let them lead him away.

Before them, a rectangle took shape, diffused white light through which indistinct shapes moved. As they drew nearer, the images resolved, revealing the airport waiting area and concourse he had left ... how long ago? Minutes? Hours? A lifetime?

A shadow suddenly angled across the opening, then partially retreated. Steel tightened his grip on Benny's arm. "Quickly!" he ordered, pushing him toward Sapphire as he spun around.

Without question or hesitation, she urged Benny toward the opening, where the pulsing shadow strained to eclipse the light. Someone was trying to shut the door, he realized.

"Steel!" Sapphire called sharply as they reached the threshold.

Her companion, still glaring back into the grayness, shook his head, muttered darkly under his breath, then strode quickly to join them. Just as Sapphire reached out to draw him with her through the gate, a shadow fell across Benny's free hand.

With growing horror, he stared as the darkness crept up his arm. He tried to flex fingers that he suddenly

knew weren't there. Steel stood before him in a movement that took less than a heartbeat, holding Sapphire at bay with an extended arm. "Don't touch him!" he warned between clenched teeth.

The shadow slid upward, a slow, inexorable climb; his entire forearm was gone. Shaking with terror, Benny forced his eyes up to meet Steel's implacable glare and Sapphire's startled expression. "Help me," he begged. "Please."

Steel didn't move, even as Benny reacted with a shrill cry as the darkness moved up to his shoulder. Sapphire attempted to move past her companion, but he held her back, his jaw tightening.

"Steel," she said, her voice low and husky. "I must."

"No," he grated.

"I must try."

She tried once more to move past him when Benny screamed again, but this time slipped her hand around the one that restrained her and gripped tightly. "I must," she repeated in a whisper.

His arm came away slowly, enough for her to slip past him and come forward to place her hand on Benny's shoulder.

His eyes flew open with a gasp, but there was only panic in them, no recognition. She ignored his feeble attempt to push her away with his other hand, concentrating on the darkness that had halted its advance at her touch.

His senses returned slowly as she held on to him, her eyes glowing like twin blue suns. She murmured something he couldn't hear past the pounding in his ears. Then, as he watched in fearful fascination, the shadow reluctantly retreated, and her hand followed it, down his arm, past his elbow ...

He broke out in nervous, relieved laughter as her hand passed over his, and the last touch of darkness swirled off the tips of his fingers. Trying to choke out an expression of gratitude, his breath stopped in his throat as the shadow suddenly returned, wrapping itself like a whip around Sapphire's hand and arm.

"No!" Steel cried, leaping forward to grab ... nothing.

Sapphire made a sound, more of surprise than fear as the shadow slithered up her shoulder. Responding more to the sudden horror on Steel's face, Benny clutched her other arm more tightly in a desperate, although he knew ultimately vain, attempt to save her.

"*Help* her," Benny pleaded.

Steel shook his head numbly. "I don't know how," he said, an anguished, angry whisper.

She uttered another sound, flinching as the shadow coiled toward her face. "Take him," she gasped. "Steel, take him back. Quickly. *Quickly!*"

Benny resisted the hand Steel laid on his arm, despite knowing that the man could wrench the limb from its socket without breaking a sweat. At that moment, a sound unlike any other he'd ever heard split the air around them. A cry formed in a human throat, yet utterly inhuman; a single, wrenching scream of pure anger and defiance.

"*No!*"

The shadow snapped away. Abruptly released, Sapphire fell heavily against Benny, gasping for breath. Tentatively, Steel touched her shoulder as though to reassure himself it was whole again, then unexpectedly met Benny's gaze. It was clear, without discussion, that both of them knew who had used what was quite probably his last ounce of strength to drive off Sapphire's attacker.

"Are you all right?"

Benny's head snapped up, his eyes wide with astonishment. Sapphire regarded him with quiet concern, as if nothing at all had happened to her. But that wasn't quite true. There was something new in her eyes, a slight shimmer that he suddenly didn't have the strength to interpret. A wave of nausea knocked his knees out from under him; only Sapphire's support kept him from collapsing.

Steel, with uncommon gentleness, urged them through the unobstructed door. Benny clung tightly to Sapphire, eyes closed against the violent muscle spasms that began to rip through his body.

Something warm contacted his fingers, pressing gently until he opened his hand. He stared down at where he knew his hand must be until his vision cleared and he found himself looking into the steaming depths of a cup of coffee.

And someone else's slim, graceful fingers still resting against his. He lifted his head to meet her concerned eyes.

"Welcome back," Sapphire said softly.

Discomfited, he glanced around quickly. Lounge. They were in the lounge. They'd been herded here by pale-faced airline representatives so that the resulting hysterics wouldn't upset innocent bystanders. He sat in a secluded corner of the room, Sapphire seated next to him. Nearby, the man who had only a short time ago perfunctorily introduced himself as Steel stood, silent, staring straight ahead as though only waiting for his companion to finish. Other people were clumped in scattered groups throughout the lounge, some huddled together in grief, others joining hands in silent, fervent prayer. A priest moved among them slowly, offering quiet words and gestures to those who could rouse themselves enough to accept them.

Everything was exactly as it was only a moment ago. Except this was not where he was a moment ago.

Benny tried to speak, but the words broke apart in his dry throat. Sapphire responded by guiding the cup to his mouth, holding it steady until he'd managed a few gulps. He thanked her with a nod, then waited behind closed eyes until his courage returned.

"What happened?" he rasped.

"What do you remember?"

He shook his head after a moment's thought resulted in a hopeless jumble of fragmented images evoking unpleasant feelings. "The last thing I remember is ... going through the gate with you."

Tension visibly drained from her as she managed a wan smile. As he considered her odd reaction, he frowned. There was something else, something in her face that he couldn't recall seeing in his last clear memory of her: a deep, unutterable sadness that he felt, oddly, to be a strange mirror of the anguish that had every nerve ending in his body twisted into a knot.

"Well?" He drained the coffee cup. "Did you fix it?"

Her smile faded, reacting to the bitterness in his voice. "We were successful," she said quietly.

"Good. Good." He looked around again, nodding grimly. "Look, um ... I don't know who the hell you people are. And right now, I don't think I particularly care. This is all just some sort of job for you, isn't it? Just another day at the office. A time breach. A *time* breach." His incredulous snort ended in a strangled sound as he pressed his hand to his forehead. "You just waltz in here, size things up like a contracting job, whip off an estimate for repairs, and then patch everything up. But you really couldn't care less whether we think the bill is too high, do you?"

"Please," Sapphire said gently, one hand soft on his arm. "What was done was necessary. You must believe that."

"Because you say so?" He yanked his arm away. "What do you care what I believe?"

"I do. I do care."

"You don't know me, lady. And you sure as hell don't know what you just cost me."

Behind them, out of Sapphire's line of vision, Steel turned his head, eyes blazing. Without looking back, Sapphire merely held up a hand. Seething, Steel drew in a deep breath, then turned away again.

"That's it, then," Benny sighed, rubbing his burning eyes with both hands. "I just walk away from here and ... what? Go on with my life? Well, funny thing, that. I don't have a life anymore. It's gone." His voice shimmered and broke. "She's gone."

She touched his arm, waiting until he willingly gave her his hand to entwine her fingers with his. He stared down at their clasped hands, desperately fighting to keep his anger and despair from draining away. Those were his, his to keep if he wanted them, she had no right to take them away. No right. No ... right ...

He sagged in defeat, eyes stinging. "Why can't I remember what happened in there?" he whispered haggardly.

"It's better that way," Sapphire assured him.

"Why? Why did this have to happen?"

"I don't know. I'm telling you the truth," she said to his sharp glance. "You must believe that. I don't know why this has happened at all, or why it has happened to you. I know only that ... you are important to someone. No, I don't know who. Someone. I don't know why. That's all I know. That's all I can tell you."

"Is that why you said you were here to help me?" he said, almost wishing that his memory of his first meeting with them wasn't quite so clear. They'd appeared as though out of thin air, flanking him as he'd stared at the boarding gate that seemed to be open but that he somehow knew should be shut. They'd called him by name, had given their names perfunctorily when he, in a confused daze, demanded to know who they were, and then they'd ignored every other question he asked them. Steel had explained the breach as calmly as someone else would discuss a pothole in the road; Sapphire had patiently shown him how, by shifting position and angle, one could see the layers within layers of displaced time that the breach exposed. He'd been too bewildered to question it then, but was beginning to realize that there'd been a studied purpose to their actions. They didn't have to explain anything to anyone, least of all him. But they had. As though it were important for him to know. As though they believed there was a chance in hell that he'd understand a word of what they were saying. As though ... they knew him.

They'd called him by name ...

"When you first showed up, you knew who I was. You knew me."

"We have met before."

"I don't ..."

"Not in your lifetime to this point. Not yet."

He shook his head, hopelessly confused. "I heard you two talking before we ... I heard you tell him that my destiny had something to do with yours, that ... that our paths were converging." He spared a sharp glance at a seemingly heedless Steel. "And he didn't sound too happy about agreeing with you, either. This doesn't have anything to do with that bull you gave me about making sure this happened the way it's supposed to in order to prevent something worse happening to fill the void. You know more about this than you're telling me, don't you?"

"We only know what is happening," she assured him. "But even we do not know why."

He took a deep breath, released it shakily, then drew another, holding it for a long moment with his eyes tightly closed. "Then what is the point?" he begged in a strained voice, the last word ending in an explosion of air from his lungs.

Her hand remained on his trembling shoulders for a long time, until the tears he kept hidden behind the hands clasped tightly over his face had dried and his breathing had eased. "We must leave now," he heard her say with a touch of regret. "Our work here is done. But you must promise me, please. Please. When you leave this place, do not take the anger with you. Find someone to help you leave the anger behind. Promise me."

He forced his stiffened hands away from his face, taking a final swipe at his eyes as he turned his head toward her. But she wasn't there. Steel wasn't there. He found himself alone in the far corner of the airport lounge, now nearly deserted.

Except for the man who approached him with a kind smile and words that his jumbled mind couldn't quite make sense out of. He stared dumbly at the newcomer, finally sorting out enough details to recognize the clerical collar and crucifix and make a connection. His first instinct was to send the priest away with a brusque gesture and the all-too-true explanation that what the man represented didn't exactly fit into his own set of personal beliefs. But something held his muscles still and his mouth shut. Something like a gentle voice urging him to leave the anger behind, and to do it, use someone else's strength in place of the strength he no longer possessed.

"Sure, Father," he heard his own voice, remarkably calm if still heavy and slow. "Sure. I guess I could use someone to talk to right now. Thanks."

He leaned back in his chair, rubbing at his burning eyes. For once he was grateful for the solitude of the lab, so that no one would see that the indefatigable Dr. Edgar Benedek could indeed be brought to the point of exhaustion by a full day of press conferences and interviews. The last reporter had been ushered out by his loyal research assistants less than an hour ago. They'd also insisted on taking him home for some much needed rest, but failed to take the precaution of ensuring that he'd stay there.

Rest. His aged body screamed for it, but his mind was still racing as fast as his heart. Tomorrow would see his place secured in the history books. His name would be spoken in the same breath as the great pioneers of science and technology: Einstein, Edison, Hawking. At least that's what the reporters kept burbling. All they needed to see, with their own eyes, was the first public trial scheduled for ten the next

morning, and they would hand him his fame and fortune on bended knee.

The key lock on the main lab door disengaged with a quiet click. Benny noted it with only mild interest. Only a few dozen people could have gotten past the outer security, fewer still had access to this floor of the building, and only five possessed key cards for the lab. He could easily handle the displeasure that any of the five would display upon finding him hard at work in the lab instead of safely at home, asleep.

The door opened and closed with its usual soft hiss. No familiar voice greeted him. No other sound followed.

Benedek raised his head, but didn't turn around. He pressed a hand to his mouth reflectively, considering the implications of the feeling that had just come over him. The feeling that the door had never really opened. The sounds were just a polite way of getting his attention.

"Took your time getting here, didn't you?" he said finally.

A rustling sound told him that the intruder stood only a few feet away, behind him and to one side, and had taken a step toward him. "By my reckoning, I'm right on schedule," a quiet, amused voice assured him.

Benny turned just as the stranger entered the dim light spilled by his desk lamp. "I expect I look a bit different cleaned up," Silver smiled as Benny frowned and squinted at him.

"What you look like is someone who hasn't aged a day in forty years."

"Clean living." With another smile, Silver sauntered over to a workbench, leaning casually against it. "I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

"Remember you?" Benny snorted softly. "Funny thing about that. Didn't remember a thing about you two seconds after we left that ... that place. Didn't remember much of anything, really. Just that I'd known ... she wasn't coming back. But how did I know? Those two strange people hadn't told me, I already knew even before they showed up. But how? How had I *known?* I couldn't remember. I didn't have an answer. It drove me nuts, just ... *nuts.* So I managed to convince myself that I'd had a premonition. That I'd known what was going to happen even before I'd left for the airport." He paused, his weary eyes shining in the dim light as he stared fixedly into the memory. "I even got myself to believe that I'd tried to call her, warn her. I couldn't have known what was going to happen and then just let it happen. Could I? So I must have tried to warn her, that had to be what had happened ..."

He blinked, drawing in a deep breath that straightened his shoulders and brought him out of his reverie. "Then it all started coming back. Little bits first, a few here and there, then more, and then even more until they started forming bigger bits. Not all at once, no ... took years to happen. Almost like ..." He paused, lifting a finger. "Almost like I'm remembering in reverse. Get my meaning? Almost like right after it happened I was remembering it like it'd happened forty years ago, and right now, it's as clear as if it had just happened yesterday."

"I think it *was* yesterday, actually," Silver said quietly.

Benny nodded, deep in thought. "It started here, then, didn't it? You weren't back in the past with us — we were here, with you."

It was a question to which Benny obviously already knew the answer, so Silver merely answered with a slight smile.

"I guess this means I made the right choice after all," Benny said after a long silence.

"You tell me."

"Didn't think so. Not for a long time." He reached over, picking up a framed photo and staring at it for a few moments before turning it toward Silver to reveal the smiling faces of a handsome woman and two teenaged girls. "The boy's camera-shy. Managed to weasel his way out of the shoot. Can't imagine where he gets it from."

"A beautiful wife and three lovely children," Silver said with a congratulatory nod.

"Best things that ever happened to me. Who'd have thought? Not me. Not then."

Silver made a point of seeking out the vast array of framed diplomas and awards crowding the walls. "Fame and fortune?"

"More than any man has a right to expect," Benny admitted.

"Well, then. You tell me."

"You're here. I guess that means it was the right choice all the way around."

Silver's smile grew, genuinely relieved. "I'm glad you think so."

Benny studied him for a long moment, then reached over to turn the desk lamp around, directing the beam full on Silver. Livid scars gleamed on the man's face and hands. His smile fading, Silver accepted the scrutiny in silence.

"You escaped," he said finally, returning the lamp to its original position. "I ... they didn't seem to think you would."

"Thanks to you, really. They were so infuriated that you'd evaded their last attempt to stop you that they forgot about me. Long enough for me to slip past them, anyway."

Benny pondered the studied insouciance in the man's tone and decided against pointing out that he knew full well that the pattern of scarring was more extensive than he remembered and therefore considerably more recent than Silver wanted him to believe.

"What happened to them?" Benny asked, keeping his tone level.

"Who?"

"Sapphire." He fixed Silver with a calm stare. "Steel."

"Why do you ask?"

"They're why you're here, aren't they?"

Silver tilted his head, his expression both amused and suspicious. "You can't know that," he said, but Benny sensed it was actually a question and that his voice held more than a hint of fear.

"Call it an inspired guess," he replied, detecting genuine relief as the cause of the badly suppressed sigh that Silver expelled. "You were the one who insisted that they were the target, not me."

"Do you think of them kindly?" Silver asked suddenly, his expression neutral.

Benny eyed him as he considered. "Try another adverb."

"Any suggestions?"

He shook his head after a moment, gaze straying to the framed portrait in front of him. "Kindly will do, I suppose," he decided finally.

"You would have no reason to wish them harm, then. To satisfy a certain sense of personal justice, as it were?"

"No," he answered before he'd really thought about the answer. "No, of course not."

"Would you then feel inclined to perhaps ... help them?"

He looked up, realizing that the man was no longer leaning against the workbench; was, in fact, no longer pretending casual indifference. Silver stood only a few feet away from him now, leaning toward him with his hands held together in an almost ... suppliant pose.

"Help them?" Benny echoed, confused. "Why would they need my help?"

"Suffice to say only that they do," Silver explained, his voice low and intense. "Desperately so."

"What's happened to them?"

Encouraged by the genuine concern he heard in Benny's voice, Silver ventured another step closer. "You know we have enemies. Implacable enemies, Mr. Benedek. And ruthless. Some time ago, they set a cunning trap and we — the three of us together — fell into it. I escaped. They did not."

Benny leaned back in his chair. "You knew about this when you came back to warn me."

"Oh, no, no. But my memory was fully restored once I ..."

"Don't kid a kidder, pal," Benny's voice rose sharply. "You knew all along. You lied to me. You lied to them. You *knew*."

Silver remained silent as Benny continued, angrily. "'I don't remember,' you kept saying. 'I don't remember.' I *begged* you to tell me why, and you *lied* to me."

"It was necessary," Silver offered in a curiously distant voice after Benny's angry shout had faded into the silence. "I'm sorry."

"Is that the truth now?" Benny asked with exaggerated suspicion, steepling his fingers and staring at Silver over them. "Or another necessary lie?"

"I assure you, it *was* necessary. They couldn't know. Don't you see? They couldn't know." Silver's voice shook with intensity. "If I'd given them even the barest hint, it might have affected their actions."

"You could have kept them from falling into the trap at all," Benny pointed out.

"Or the knowledge could have led them to even greater harm. I couldn't take that risk. Not when I already knew of a way to free them from *this* trap."

Benny stared at his fingertips as he gently tapped them together. "That's where I come in, I take it."

"Yes."

"Why?" He spoke carefully, recognizing that he was finally phrasing the one question that had haunted him for the past four decades. "What's so important about me?"

"Do I take your interest to mean that you are indeed willing to help?"

Benny gave him a sharp look. "Pal, after forty years of recurring nightmares, do you really think I'm operating on a level of practical interest here?"

"I must warn you that this should not be a casual decision."

"I assume that means we're talking risk?"

"Very much so. It's entirely possible that, should we succeed, our enemies would become yours as well."

Benny considered. "Can I handle that?"

Silver didn't insult him with a quick, glib answer. Nodding solemnly, he answered seriously, "With my guidance, yes. I believe so."

"You believe so?" Benny snorted, glancing pointedly at the latticework of scars on Silver's hands and face. "Looks to me like you haven't done such a hot job of handling them yourself."

Silver followed that glance down to look at his scarred hands before folding them, too casually, behind his back. "I can only tell you that the situation was one in which you would ... *could* ... never find yourself placed. You are, for the most part, protected from them by the mere fact of your humanity. They can't harm you through direct action. And I can tell you how to protect yourself from the ways in which they *could* cause you harm."

Benny grimaced, shaking his head. "You know, it seems to me that Steel had a hard time trusting you, too. I got the feeling that he thought you'd say just about anything to get something you wanted." He eyed Silver thoughtfully. "And he knows you a lot better than I do, doesn't he?"

"It's in his nature to be cautious," Silver observed quietly.

Benny snorted again. "That's kind."

"I have no reason to lie to you. Not now."

"Maybe," Benny conceded after a reflective moment. "Maybe I believe that." Another long silence passed, ending with an explosive exhale as he slapped his hand against the top of the desk. "Maybe I don't have a choice. Okay ... where do we start?"

Silver blinked, nonplussed, prompting Benny's irritable, "Well, come on. I'm an old man, and I'm getting older by the minute with you standing there gawking at me. You came here for a reason, so spit it out — where do we start?"

"Right here," Silver recovered with a broad smile, turning to gesture toward the access door at the far side of the lab. "Everything we need is right here."

Benny pursed his lips. "My time machine."

"Your matter/anti-matter temporal control interface," Silver corrected, amused. "Yes — your time machine."

"Somehow, it figured," Benny sighed.

"I'll be forced to make some modifications that will, I fear, render your equipment, well ... quite useless."

"For how long?"

It took Silver a long time to form the reply. "Permanently."

Benny stared at him, expressionless. Unable to detect emotion on the man's face, Silver inclined his head, brow furrowing in deepening apprehension as the

silence grew. "Mr. Benedek?" he ventured after a full minute had passed without sound or movement from the elderly man seated at the desk.

Rapid eye blinks preceded a sudden intake of air, as though Benny had, until now, forgotten how to breathe. "A gun would have been quicker, you know," he muttered.

"If there were any other way ..."

"You're not talking about taking out the Institute's matter/anti-matter accelerator, are you? That's not my call to make, that's someone else's baby, you'd be destroying the life work of dozens of other people ..."

"No, no, the accelerator itself will remain undamaged. You only tap into it for the initial reaction process, after all. My modifications will only affect that which transpires strictly within the confines of your interface mechanism."

His panic subsided a little at that, but not enough to ease his rapid breathing. "You're still talking about wiping out two years of my life," he moaned. "Two *years*."

"From initial theory to final implementation, yes." Benny's eyes flew open, startled, to find that Silver had, somehow, ended up crouched by his side. "But it's just the machinery that will be destroyed, not your entire body of work. You can rebuild in a matter of weeks, and with my help, you'll ..."

"Your help?" Benny barked.

"You can't imagine I'd not offer recompense for the loss I'm asking you to incur," he said with a mock grieved air.

Benny's eyes narrowed. "What kind of recompense?"

"Professional advice," he whispered, eyes dancing as he watched the old man react to his words. "You haven't solved the problem of stability in the higher temporal frequencies, have you?"

"It's solvable?" Benny demanded warily.

"Eminently. A minor correction in the calculations for the primary induction process, and a small adjustment to the flow ratio will completely eliminate the forced duration expiration." He leaned closer, adding conspiratorially, "And you'll eliminate your research budget's wardrobe replacement line item expense."

Benny opened his mouth, then closed it again, determined not to let out a sound until his head stopped spinning.

"Is it enough? Is what I'm offering payment enough for what I'm asking you to sacrifice?"

Slowly, the dazed look left Benny's eyes as he focused on Silver's anxious face. "Is my machine the only hope they have?"

"Yes," Silver replied softly.

It took a moment for Silver to realize that Benny was staring at his scarred hand where it rested against the side of the desk.

"That's all you really had to tell me, you know," Benny said finally.

Silver's flash of wild relief segued immediately into a cautious look. "Are you quite certain?"

"Don't push your luck, pal. Take what you can get while I'm in a mood to give it, and get this over with."

Silver smiled, grateful and relieved. "Come," he urged, rising.

Benny blinked up at him. "What do you need me for?"

"Your security access?"

"You got in here without it," he pointed out testily.

"Your expertise."

"You're the one who knows what he's doing."

A pause. "Your pleasant company."

Benny grudgingly met the man's smiling eyes. "I think I've finally figured out why I can't seem to hate your guts."

"And why is that?"

"Because we're a lot alike, you and me. More than I'm really thrilled about, but ... yeah. A lot alike."

"Do you really think so?" Silver asked in a flattered tone of voice.

Benny gave him a disparaging look. "You tell me. What would you have done if I'd said no?"

Silver cast his eyes down as he pursed his lips. "I hadn't given that possibility much thought."

"Why?" he shot back.

"Truthfully ... it never occurred to me that you would say no."

"Of course not." Benny tapped the air with his finger. "If it had, you wouldn't have even bothered to ask. You'd have just done it, and my feelings be damned, eh? This is all just a formality, a ... a ..."

"Consideration. A courtesy," Silver supplied with a resigned sigh. "I owe you that much."

"Yeah," Benny murmured, nodding thoughtfully. "A lot alike."

A movement in the silence drew his attention. Silver extended a hand toward him in a beckoning gesture. "I owe you that much," he echoed meaningfully. "And more. Come."

"Yeah, you knew I wouldn't miss this for the world," Benny grumbled good-naturedly as he lumbered to his feet.

At the access door, Silver paused, turning to Benny expectantly. He reached for the retinal scan activator then stopped, eyeing Silver speculatively. Then, with a mischievous half-smile, he folded his arms and inclined his head.

With a show of mock exasperation, Silver pressed his hand against the activation plate. White light washed his thin face, focusing on his eyes. For a moment, the warning light glowed a bright, steady red. But as Benny watched, the red light flickered and faded as the green light winked on and the access door lock clicked open.

"Nice," Benny nodded, genuinely impressed.

Silver gestured gracefully. "After you."

The outer room contained the monitoring station, an equipment-laden workbench with two chairs normally occupied by research assistants. Next to another door that led to the focusing chamber itself was the observation window, only used before and after an experiment to visually assess the condition of the experimental subject; a lead shield snapped into place during the course of a reaction cycle as a safety precaution. Silver approached the workbench to switch on the main power grid. His slender fingers unerringly found the proper switch to retract the observation window's shielding.

Benny joined him at the window as Silver carefully scrutinized the tiny room beyond. "The tricky part will be getting this door to open while the reaction is in process," Silver remarked, more to himself than to the man standing at his side.

"You're talking about overriding one of the primary failsafes," Benny objected, unnerved.

"I'm talking about pushing the cycle past *all* the failsafes," Silver informed him grimly. "The reaction will have to be stabilized ..."

"Stabilized?" Benny stared at him, aghast.

"... and sustained for a minimum of five minutes."

"Five ..." He choked on his own gasp. "That's not possible."

Silver strode back to the workbench, flicking on every switch he could find. "It is possible," he announced as he studied the information flickering on the monitors. "But it's not what this equipment was designed to do, and it's certainly not what it was designed to bear."

"But why do you have to sustain the reaction?" Benny demanded. "All our research shows all that's needed is the impetus ..."

"To send something or someone backward or forward through time, yes," Silver agreed impatiently as he frowned at a power level measurement. "But I propose to do neither, since they do not exist in normal time. That's the trap they fell into, you see. They're imprisoned in a place beyond time."

"What exists beyond time?" Benny asked, genuinely baffled.

Silver paused. "Nothing," he said softly. "Absolutely nothing."

Benny opened his mouth, then shut it again, unsure whether he feared he wouldn't understand the answer if he did demand a clarification, or whether he really didn't want to know in the first place.

"The sustained reaction will open a window between time and beyond time. My calculations must be precise. Too short a cycle, and I'll miss them. Too

long ..." He hesitated, debating whether to finish the statement. "Too long, and the opening I create will spread unchecked, destroying anything it touches. Normal time possesses adequate defense mechanisms, so the damage there would be minimal, but beyond time — it would be like striking a spark in a gas-filled room."

"Are you sure that's a risk you're prepared to take?"

Benny turned, startled as much by the intrusion of a familiar voice as he was by the fact that it had asked a question he'd just convinced himself to leave unspoken. "Jonathan?" he blurted, staring at the man who stood in the doorway leading out to the lab. Despite the fact that Jonathan MacKensie was one of only five people who had full unrestricted access to the lab, the man had never before shown up here without a good reason and a lot of complaining about his valuable time being wasted. Thirty years had turned a stubborn young anthropology professor into an intractable and often cantankerous department chairman whose views on Dr. Edgar Benedek's scientific research remained oddly the same as the opinions he'd often expressed, years ago, about the lurid articles Benny had lovingly crafted in the course of his erstwhile career as a tabloid reporter of considerable fame. Confused, Benny shook his head. "What the hell are you doing —"

He trailed off when he realized that Jonathan MacKensie was paying no attention to him. He was staring impassively at Silver who, to Benny's growing bewilderment and unease, had gone still, his eyes fixed on the hand he held, motionless, an inch above the control panel. As Benny watched, Silver straightened slowly, seeming to force himself to turn toward Jonathan and meet the man's steady gaze.

Jonathan smiled unexpectedly. He crooked a finger, beckoning Silver.

Benny took a step forward, but Silver snagged his arm, pulling him back roughly. "Don't interfere," the man said in a low, emphatic voice.

"What are you talking about? Interfere with what? What's going on here?"

Less patiently and without the smile, Jonathan gestured again. Benny's heart gave a violent lurch as he realized that the expression on Silver's suddenly drawn and ashen face was that of utter defeat.

"How long have you known him?" Silver asked, his voice pitched for Benny's ear alone.

"Over thirty years," Benny stammered.

"When did they take him?"

"When ...? They? Who ...?"

He shook Benny's arm impatiently. "When? When did they take him out of time?"

The resurgent memory punched the breath from his lungs. "March," he managed after a moment. "1987. Sapphire, Steel, they ... they came, they ... oh, my God."

No patience left, Jonathan took a step toward them. Silver reacted instantly, using his grip on Benny's arm as leverage to push himself forward, effectively interposing himself between the two men. "Stay here," he told Benny calmly. "Lock this door after we leave."

"He's got complete access to everything, including this room," Benny pointed out.

Silver's noisy exhale was a tacit comment on the fact that the request hadn't been made to keep Benny safe; but, rather, to keep him unaware of what would happen once Silver and Jonathan left the room together.

Jonathan closed the distance between them with another step and lifted his hand. For the moment that Silver's grip lingered on Benny's arm, he could feel Silver's muscles contract in dread anticipation.

"Wait a minute, wait," Benny said, abruptly grabbing Silver's shoulder and shoving him aside. "Just let me get this straight, okay? Who are you, what have you done with the real Jonathan MacKensie, and what do you want with this guy, anyway?"

The cold light vanished abruptly from Jonathan's eyes as he stared at Benedek, aghast. "No, no — you don't understand, Benedek...my God, they were right. He's completely misled you, hasn't he? I swore to them that you were far too intelligent to fall for such obvious lies, but...." He shook his head in heartfelt dismay. "Thank God, I'm not too late."

Benny squinted at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"They tried to warn you, but his clever tricks kept you out of their reach. So they came to me ..."

"They *took* you," Benny reminded him tartly.

"For pity's sake, it doesn't matter how!" Jonathan's voice resonated with emotion. "They were desperate to prevent this man from carrying out his nefarious plan ..."

"And what nefarious plan might that be?"

"He's lying to you, Benedek. He's been lying to you all along. He isn't trying to save anyone. He's only trying to keep everyone from learning how he himself betrayed his friends to save his own skin."

Benny heard Silver's sharp intake of breath, but didn't turn to assess what telling facial expression might have accompanied it. "Is that so?" he said neutrally, successfully hiding the fact that he was badly shaken; he could detect absolutely nothing insincere about Jonathan's words or manner.

"This nonsense he's filled your head with, about vengeful enemies and horrific traps, it's all a lie. Even his own people know better than to trust him. Don't you see? He's manipulating you into throwing away years of work. He doesn't need your machine to rescue anyone. He needs it to bury the last evidence of his own dastardly cowardice."

Benny inclined his head, nothing more; encouraged, Jonathan smiled in tentative relief. "They knew it would come to this," he continued. "That's why they went to such lengths to find me, the one person they knew would act in your best interests, who wouldn't allow you to throw away your life's work on the word of a craven fraud."

"You never believed in my work," Benny said quietly.

"No, you're wrong," Jonathan protested fervently.

"You're the one who volunteered to become the institute watchdog for this project so that you could officially nag me about how I and my little pipe-dream were going to single-handedly land GI in bankruptcy court."

"No. No, you're wrong," he insisted. "My God, man, why don't you believe me? We've known each other for over thirty years, Benedek. Why do you persist in allowing this man to manipulate your life in this ... this obscene fashion? Don't you understand? He's proposing to destroy two years of your life for his own selfish purposes. You've been nothing but his pawn for forty years. Forty *years*. I want to put an end to it. Help me. For pity's sake, Benedek, help me put an end to it."

Benny stared at him, expression unreadable, but a slight tremor in the hand that held back Silver betrayed his vacillation. Just as Jonathan seemed sure enough of the success of his impassioned plea to allow a smile to edge back on his face, Benny spoke, his voice low and steady.

"Nice try."

He smirked at the startled look in Jonathan's eye. "Guess you counted on me being too confused to think, eh? Seems you forgot something, too. My motto? Come on, you must remember that. No matter how much they know, no matter how much they've got on you — always, *always* trust your own instincts first."

Jonathan stared at him, hurt and betrayal in his eyes. "You're making a terrible mistake," he said mournfully after a long moment.

"Oh, yeah? Terrible for whom, exactly?"

The last syllable ended in a squawk as Jonathan's hand flashed out, grabbing Benny's shirt collar and twisting the fabric, hard, into his throat. "I'll give you one last chance," he grated. "Help me put an end to this now ... or I will put an end to you."

"Let him go," Silver demanded angrily. "Let him go. He's nothing to you."

Jonathan smirked as Benny struggled to breathe. "Nothing," he echoed derisively. "So. This little man presumes to master time itself, eh? Ignorant, pathetic ..."

"Let him go," Silver begged.

"And if I told you I'd let you walk out of here after I broke this nothing's neck and destroyed his toys?" Jonathan fixed a fiery glare on Silver without loosening his grip on Benny's collar. "If I offered you your life in exchange for his, what would you say then?"

Silver hesitated, glancing at Benny's reddened face as the man tried, in vain, to pry Jonathan's fingers away. He made a sound, the start of a word, then looked at

Benny again. His expression changed, losing fear, gaining confidence.

"Would I have your word on that?" he asked suddenly.

Jonathan burst out laughing. "If I say yes, you'd gladly kill him for me, wouldn't you?" he sneered. "You see, little man? This is what you put your trust in."

"There would be no reason to kill him if you merely destroyed his creation ..." Silver suggested meekly.

"I'm not a fool," he spat. "He'd simply rebuild and you'd slither back here to try again. No, no, the answer's quite simple. Either you or him. Or both, if you continue to irritate me."

Shoulders hunched protectively, Silver retreated a step. "As you wish," he murmured with a submissive nod.

Jonathan's dark, triumphant smile faded as he turned his attention back to Benny and found the man staring calmly at him. As MacKensie stared in growing astonishment, Benny wrapped his fingers around the wrist of the hand that Jonathan held at his throat and easily pulled it away.

With a strangled cry of protest, Jonathan tried to wrest free, but Benny held on to his wrist with no seeming effort, and caught the other hand as it went for the throat again. Eyes wide with utter disbelief, MacKensie looked down at his trembling, imprisoned hands. "What's ... happening ...?" he gasped.

Silver was at Benny's side in a flash, all traces of his obsequious manner gone. "He *is* fighting it."

"You'd better not be half as surprised as you sound," Benny growled. "What kind of hold do they have on him? Can he win?"

Silver moved past him, out of his line of vision. Benny could only guess from the sounds behind him that he was busy at the control console again. "I'm surprised he's able to fight them at all. I'm not entirely sure he can win. Or that they'd let him."

Jonathan emitted a grating sound as his entire body convulsed. He strained once more to free himself, growling with frustration when Benny's grip held firm. Then, abruptly, he went still, his eyes blinking once, twice before settling with some difficulty on Benny. For a moment, pure hatred darkened his face, followed by a strange smile that Benny suddenly realized was silent, fervent promise to make him pay dearly for his interference.

"No," Benny said under his breath as Jonathan bent double, sinking to his knees. He tightened his grip on his friend's wrists, trying to keep him upright and failing. "No, don't ... no ... come on, Jonny, don't ..."

He lost his breath with his nerve when Jonathan went rigid and still, not moving even when Benny released him to frantically check a pulse point. "He's not breathing!" he cried, panicking. "My God, he's ..."

"Fine," Silver interjected cheerfully. His hand on Benny's shoulder, he crouched by the shaken man's side. "He's fine. I've suspended time for him. Well, for everyone in a 500 meter radius, excluding us, of course."

"You ..." Benny blinked at him, shaking his head weakly. "You did that, with my interface?"

"With the help of your interface," he amended. "But I'm afraid that, in doing so, I've had to divert critical resources, the loss of which might seriously affect the outcome of my plan."

"How badly?"

"Impossible to tell. But it does mean that we'll have to work quickly. Come, I'll need your help."

Benny hesitated, looking back at Jonathan MacKensie and the look of pure anguish frozen on his friend's features. "He's fine," Silver assured him gently, taking Benny by the arm to urge him to his feet. "And when we succeed in rescuing Sapphire and Steel, they'll have no more hold over him."

Disoriented, feeling sick to his stomach, Benny gave up trying to follow what Silver was doing at the control console. Somehow, it just didn't matter anymore. His gaze kept being drawn back to Jonathan, and the memory of that last, vitriolic look before his collapse.

"Why are they doing this?" he blurted when he could no longer stand not knowing. "Why do they hate you so much?"

Silver didn't look up, but his hands hesitated in their graceful dance over the control board. "It might surprise you to know that we're actually very much alike. We share the same purpose, the same goals. What we do not share, sadly, is philosophy and methodology. You see, we represent a kind of

freedom they'll never know. That they can, in fact, not allow to exist, not within the strict framework they've built for themselves. To them, freedom is anarchy; chaos. And in a way, they're right. Freedom would destroy them, utterly. So they feel they must, in turn, obliterate that which could potentially destroy them."

"You're saying that they came after you because they don't like your attitude?" Benny said incredulously.

Silver chuckled unexpectedly. "Yes, I suppose you could put it that way. But it's rather more personal than that, I fear. You see, we were once given a choice, and we didn't choose them. So, as long as we exist, we remind them that we rejected their ways. And since they view their way as perfection and perfection cannot be rejected, well ... we then become perversions that must be eliminated."

"Our way or no way," Benny murmured bleakly.

Silver cast a quick, surprised look at him. "It is a rather human concept, isn't it?" he lamented. "Here, I'll need your help with this. Stand by the window and tell me if you detect any change inside the focusing chamber."

"What am I looking for?" he asked after a minute spent staring into the barren room with an occasional glance at the minute, almost fussy adjustments Silver made at the control console.

"If I understand the nature of the problem correctly, I'm searching for a minor anomaly that is, unfortunately, essentially free-floating — for lack of a more accurate term, of course. Difficult to track, just about impossible to stabilize in its native environment. The best I can hope for is to set up a kind of attractor, like a magnet. Draw the anomaly to us, stabilize it here within the focusing chamber, then ..." He paused, drawing air deeply into his lungs. "And then, with luck, extract the contents of the anomaly before sending it back to where it came from. As for what you're looking for ..."

"Never mind, I think I just found out."

"Describe it," Silver barked, redoubling his attention to the controls and monitors.

"One hell of a light show," Benny murmured, watching in awe as slow-moving arcs of light spread throughout the enclosed room.

"Could you possibly offer a description that's a bit more specific?" Silver snapped.

"Sorry. You've got horizontal waves of visible light in the blue-green range on the periphery, and the middle looks like the whole spectrum twice over. A lot of sparking, a lot of ..." He blinked and squinted. "It looks like random electromagnetic activity," he realized.

"It's working," Silver murmured with a broad smile. "It's actually working."

Benny shot him a look for the first hint of uncertainty he'd ever heard the man express, but was distracted by a burst of light from inside the room. "What's happening now?" Silver demanded, alerted to the change by a frantically beeping monitor.

"There's something ..." He strained to see past the glare of the single arc of light that had suddenly filled the entire room. "There's something in there. It's ... hard to see, but ..."

He paused as the flare subsided, then stared in confusion until Silver impatiently prodded, "Well?"

"I'm not sure I believe this, but ... I could swear that looks like a restaurant in there."

Silver sprang from his chair. "Wait!" Benny cried as the man tried, in vain, to open the door leading to the chamber. "It's mag-locked, it can't be opened when the reaction is in progr —"

He jumped back with a gasp as Silver, with a sudden, feral snarl, smashed the door's access panel with his fist. Circuitry sparked wildly, completely ignored as he plunged his hand into the recess and yanked out the control module. Then, with another inhuman sound from deep within his throat, he strained against the door. It slid aside slowly, grinding to a halt after six inches.

Silver collapsed against the door suddenly, completely drained. "Help me," he begged between violent gasps.

The sparks of exploding light in the room beyond distracted Benny for only a moment; he slid his shoulder into the opening Silver had created and pushed with all his might. Just as he was sure that every bone on that side of his body was about to shatter from the strain, the door suddenly gave way and he tumbled into the room.

Dazed, he managed to regain his senses only after Silver had him halfway back onto his feet. "Thanks," he murmured, looking around in confusion and

amazement. The room was small, dotted with several neat rows of tables covered with red cloths, each table flanked by a pair of simple wooden chairs. Aside from a large curtained window, the only other feature of the room appeared to be double doors leading to what was probably the kitchen. "My God, I was right. It *is* a restaurant."

"A small roadside café." Silver's voice was faint as he glanced around, uneasily confronting a unpleasant memory. "Not precisely what I remember, but the dimensions are similar and...."

His grip tightened on Benny's arm, silently directing his attention to a far corner of the strange room.

They stood, face-to-face, arms extended, hands joined. Benny let Silver lead the way to them, and held back as Silver cautiously approached and leaned in between them, searching each of their faces in turn. With a glance back at Benny, Silver passed his hand between the two at eye-level. Neither moved or reacted, not so much as an eye-blink.

"What's wrong with them?" Benny asked, unable to get his voice much above a whisper. He followed Silver's movement as the man paced a slow circle around the immobile pair. "Are they —"

"No," Silver said quickly, a strange, awe-filled light growing in his eyes. "No, they're not. This is amazing." His voice dropped suddenly, as though he spoke only for his own benefit as he continued to stare in wonder. "I can't believe they did this. I can't believe ..." He broke off with a sudden, short laugh colored by genuine surprise.

"What? Can't believe what?" Benny prodded. "What's going on here?"

"If I could only do the explanation justice," he marveled, voice quavering with suppressed excitement. "You see, it wouldn't have taken them long to realize the true insidious purpose of this trap. It was constructed not only to imprison them, but to destroy them, one little piece at a time. Think of it. An eternity imprisoned in this nothingness ..."

"They'd go mad," Benny guessed grimly.

"Yes, quite," Silver agreed in a hushed voice, still gazing between the impassive faces of his friends. "So they chose this alternative. A kind of self-imposed stasis, removing the fragile consciousness from the destructive effects of eternity. The only problem is that it takes a minimum of two to affect such a state, and once entered, it can only be terminated by an outside influence. And only if that outside influence is in time."

"What do you mean, in time?"

"I mean, this state can't be maintained indefinitely. Bereft of consciousness, the corporeal entity begins a slow, steady disintegration. Left long enough, it becomes impossible to re-integrate."

Benny had to remind himself to breathe. "So what you're saying is, they either decided to commit slow suicide, or ..." He focused abruptly on Silver's drawn face, "... or they knew someone would come for them."

Silver looked away, but not before Benny caught the telling glint of reflected light in his eyes.

"Can you do it?" Benny urged quietly.

He nodded to cover the moment he needed to regain his composure. "If I'm not too late."

Benny edged closer as Silver lifted his hands, placing one on Steel's shoulder, the other on Sapphire's. His fingers gripped gently as he drew a deep breath to summon concentration and closed his eyes.

A full minute passed in silence, without movement. A sensation tingling along the back of Benny's neck finally drew his rapt attention away from the eerie tableau. The café's window seemed to buckle slightly. A trill of sparking light ran along the edge of the tablecloths. Vinyl seat covers rippled, like light dancing across the fur of a stretching animal.

"Hurry up," Benny urged under his breath. "Come on."

Part of the ceiling flexed, as though struck by a tremendous, soundless blow; behind him, something behind the kitchen door clattered metallically to the floor. With increasing trepidation, Benny forced his attention back to Silver and gaped.

In the space of a few seconds, a drastic change had overcome Silver. His face was gray, marred by deep lines of strain. Healthy scar tissue disintegrated; blood oozed from a dozen re-opened wounds. As Benny watched, open-mouthed, even the man's clothing seemed to deteriorate, covered by stains and rips whose placement Benny found not-so-strangely familiar. Silver's entire body trembled violently, as though he fought unbearable pain to finish what he'd

started. And to no seeming avail; there was not a flicker of movement from either Sapphire or Steel in response to his desperate efforts.

Benny sidled up behind Silver as close as he dared, fists clenched in an agony of helplessness. Suddenly, Silver wrenched back with a gasp, as though his last reserve of strength had snapped like a thin rope. Benny caught him, keeping him upright when it become obvious that the man's only options were to accept the support or slide to the floor in a nerveless heap.

"Thank you," Silver said when his scraping gasps eased enough to allow him to speak.

"It's not working."

"No." Silver waved a hand weakly. "No, I just need to catch my breath and ..."

"Stop lying to me, damn you!" he said between clenched teeth. "You tried to make me think you were fine, that you were all healed up and healthy as a horse, but that was a lie too, wasn't it?"

"I saw no reason to cloud the issue with such an insignificant detail," he protested weakly.

"How long has it really been since the last time you saw me, huh? Forty years? Four weeks? Four *minutes?*"

"That's not important now —"

"This is *killing* you."

He steadied himself against Benny's arm, regaining his own balance. "Well, appearances can be deceiving, can't they?"

"You can't ..."

"I must."

The sharply spoken words carried unexpected heat that retracted Benny's hands when Silver tugged his arm free. But the motion cost him. With a soft sound of surprise, he collapsed again, and this time all Benny could do was ease him to his knees.

"You *can't,*" Benny said, an emphatic whisper next to his ear, gripping his shoulders tightly as much to support him as to make sure he didn't try to get up again.

But Silver made no effort to move, his head bowed heavily as he struggled for breath and composure. At length, he spoke, voice dulled by despair so deep that it shook Benny to his soul to hear it. "Then I've lost."

"Come on," Benny sighed, bracing himself to drag Silver to his feet and away from the room that appeared to be self-destructing around them. "We've got to —"

Silver tried to lift his head when Benny neither finished his words nor moved another muscle, but just as it seemed that the strength he needed to do so would fail him, fingers gently brushed his face, tipping up his chin. His eyes widened, despair slipping into wonder as he stared up into Sapphire's soft smile.

Her other hand feathered the side of his ravaged face as light glimmered in her blue eyes. "I knew you would come for us," she said, a heartfelt whisper. "I knew."

Silver grasped her hand where it rested against his face, holding it there like a treasured warmth as he closed his eyes and released a shuddering sigh.

Nearby, Steel lifted a hand to his forehead, his eyes filmed by confusion. His disorientation snapped away as a nearby wall seemed to fold in on itself. He grabbed Benny's shoulder. "Lead us."

Benny instantly saw the reason for Steel's terse command; the chamber door was no longer visible in the growing chaos around them. Without discussion, Steel usurped his attempt to help Silver to his feet, easily lifting and supporting the stricken man. "Lead!" he barked.

Shielding his eyes with an upraised arm, Benny skittered through the arcing lights that seemed to be consuming the solid objects around them in a hungry white-hot blaze. "Here!" he called as a swipe of his hand contacted the half-open access door. "Go, go!"

Sapphire stood aside to allow Steel to ease his burden through the narrow space, then reached for Benny's arm. Anticipating the move, he side-stepped, and caught her wrist to push her forward. "Uh-uh. Ladies first."

She hesitated, but an explosion of crackling sparks called the question. Ducking through the opening, she turned back, reaching for Benny.

Just as his fingers locked with hers, the boundaries of the room imploded. White light blinded him, then darkness wrapped tightly around him, choking him, screaming in his ears. He fell back with a cry. And fell. And kept falling ...

Someone shouted, angry and defiant, and suddenly he hit the ground with such force that his breath was knocked out of his lungs. He lay dazed, nose pressed against cold vinyl tile until his scattered senses reassembled enough for him to recognize the pattern, one that he himself had picked out of a decorator's catalog by flipping a page and stabbing a finger at the first sample he'd come upon.

A rush of adrenalin gave him the strength he needed to flip himself onto his back and stare up at Sapphire, who hovered over him in concern. Steel stood by the chair into which he'd eased Silver, but was staring, puzzled, at Jonathan MacKensie, who was still frozen in place on his knees.

Benny allowed Sapphire to help him to a sitting position, not minding at all when she took most of his weight against her bracing arm as the room tilted and swirled around him. He found it, in fact, rather pleasant to use her face to focus his fractured vision. "Welcome back," he whispered, unable to suppress a giddy smile as he spoke.

"The sensation will pass shortly," she assured him with a smile of her own.

"Oh. That's too bad," he murmured, letting his reeling head come to a comfortable rest against her shoulder.

"Sapphire."

Steel's voice was low, terse; imperative. Both she and Benny looked up to see the reason for the man's concern. Silver, huddled in the chair by the control console, had pitched forward in a near faint.

Benny released her from his side with a silent tightening of his grip on her upper arm. With a quick, grateful smile, she rose and hurried to Silver's side as Steel carefully lifted him back into the chair. He kept his hand on the stricken man's shoulder although it was no longer necessary to steady him, looking down at Silver's bowed head as Sapphire went to her knees before him. She cupped Silver's ashen, bloodied face in her hands, her trembling fingers soothing away red-tinged wetness. He roused at her touch, looked up at her through slitted, exhausted eyes and managed a pale smile. "As lovely as ever, my dear," he rasped, losing his voice and his strength on the last word.

Something about the drawn look in Steel's face and the fact that Sapphire said nothing in reply sent Benny's heart into his throat with a resounding thud. "You can help him, can't you?"

"He has severely overtaxed his resources," Sapphire said, every word spoken too carefully. What was supposed to sound like a rebuke directed at Silver failed its intent when her voice caught, threatening to break.

"I shouldn't have let him do this," Benny whispered, mortified.

Silver made a sharp, cautionary sound, lifting his hand with great effort to touch Benny's arm. "You never really had a choice, did you?" he said with what was meant to be a taunting smile but which dissolved, too quickly, into an agonized grimace as his arm dropped back to his side. He swallowed deeply, drawing a shaky breath. "So sorry about the mess."

Benny pressed his lips together tightly. "Don't worry about it. You've already paid for the damages."

A faint smile flickered on Silver's pallid face as his eyes closed in peaceful relief.

Sapphire met Steel's. "Do you still believe he betrayed us?" she challenged, her voice low yet angry enough for Benny to flinch at its impact. "Do you?"

For a moment, Steel seemed inclined to dismiss the accusation, but his attempt to muster a suitable level of indignation failed. He closed his eyes, bowing his head, and released a short, quiet sigh.

The argument was an old one, Benny realized. He got a pretty good idea how bitterly it must have been waged just from the fiery look in Sapphire's eyes. And how completely it had just ended from the expression on Steel's face; as close, Benny also guessed, as the man could come to an abject apology.

Steel's eyes opened, seeking her softened gaze. Tension eased visibly from him as a smile — forgiveness — edged onto her face.

For a moment longer they remained locked in silent communication. Then Steel reached down and gently lifted Silver from the chair, taking the man's full weight against his shoulder.

Sapphire turned to face Benny, pressing his hand between both of hers. "If we had known ..."

Benny shook his head. "No. No, we, ah ... him and me, we had a talk about that already. It's okay." When her wary expression didn't change, he added, firmly and quietly, "I'm okay."

Her smile banished any lingering doubts he might have harbored that he'd indeed spoken the fervent truth. "You are, indeed, truly a special man."

He accepted with a subdued nod. "Just, um ... just do what you can for him. All right?"

"Nothing less," she assured him with a smile that warmed him through. Unexpectedly, she leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. "Goodbye," she whispered, her breath warm against his ear.

Behind closed eyes, he felt the comforting pressure of her hands against his vanish. Where she had once stood before him was now, he knew even before he reluctantly edged his eyes open, empty space. No trace of Steel or Silver remained where they had been only a second ago. All that was left was the forlorn beeping of damaged controls and monitors, and Jonathan MacKensie kneeling on the floor nearby, holding his hands to his head as he emitted a low moan.

"Hey." Benny reached down, tapping Jonathan's upper arm until the disoriented man allowed Benny to grasp it and help him to his feet. "Believe me when I tell you, pal, it's not worth having a stroke over. Come on, easy now, that's it. Sit down here. Close your eyes, deep breaths. Relax. Good, that's good."

Jonathan blinked rapidly, unable or unwilling to release the death grip he had on Benny's arm even as he leaned heavily back in the chair. "What ... what happened, what did I ..." He grimaced abruptly in utter confusion. "What the devil am I doing here?"

"You came by to wish me luck tomorrow, remember?" Benny said, watching him carefully. "You walked in here and, uh ... well, you took one look at this and you kinda went a little funny on me. There's this charming social ritual, you know, maybe you've heard of it — it's called knocking first?"

"I don't remember ..." His voice disappeared as his vision finally cleared and he got his first good look at the burned and blasted control console. "My God," he breathed. "What happened here?"

Benny made an expansive gesture. "Well, you know me. I never could leave well enough alone, could I? I got this idea, see, about how we could improve the ... well, it doesn't matter anymore, does it? At least I proved that the idea wouldn't work, eh?"

Jonathan stared aghast at the thin wisps of smoke curling around the edges of the damaged access door. "Was anyone hurt?" he asked in a faint voice.

"Naw, it was all flash and smoke," he assured his friend blithely, briefly hoping that his throbbing elbow wasn't about to turn spectacular colors and make a liar out of him.

Jonathan shook his head numbly. "This is disastrous."

"Yeah," Benny agreed, making his best attempt to look distressed. "Well ... it was a good try. Got nobody but myself to blame that it didn't work."

Frowning, Jonathan squinted up at him. "You're not planning to give up, surely?"

It was Benny's turn to stare. "That's not a serious question, is it?" he demanded warily.

"It's very serious," he retorted, affronted. "This project is the achievement of a lifetime, Benedek. You can't give up on it now."

Benny opened his mouth, raised his hand, lowered his hand, closed his mouth, and stared at Jonathan some more. "Achievement of a lifetime," he echoed as though the words were foreign terms that refused to translate. "I could have sworn I just heard those words coming out of your mouth. Is one of my grad students practicing ventriloquism or am I at home asleep having a very strange dream?"

"Benedek," he sighed, an abashed look coming over his face. "Benny. I ... I admit, I've been less than, well ... supportive of your work ever since you first came to me with your proposal. But that doesn't mean I didn't believe in the importance of what you were attempting to prove. It may have taken me a while to come around, but ... I do. I do believe."

An incredulous smile spread wide over Benny's face. "Great. Just great. I've got to reduce millions of dollars worth of machinery and equipment to

smoldering slag before I can get you to admit that I'm right?"

Jonathan winced. "The Board," he groaned. "Oh, my God, how are we going to explain this to them?"

"We?" Benny said, eyebrow arched. "Did you just say 'we'? As in, you aren't planning to stand back with an 'I told you so' smirk and leave me hanging out to dry?"

He regretted the words as soon as he spoke them. Jonathan seemed to deflate as he rubbed his forehead tiredly. "No," he said at length. "I would not do that. And ... I apologize if my behavior and my attitude toward you over the past several years has convinced you that I could possibly consider doing something so ... petty, so ..."

"Take it easy, take it easy," he said with a laugh to cover the thrill of genuine amazement. "I was just having you on, come on. I'm not sure why it's so important to you all of a sudden, but I don't think you're a terrible person, honest. Never have. No, really."

Jonathan spared him a disparaging look for the exaggerated tone of voice of a parent soothing a distraught child, but didn't look away fast enough for Benny to miss the amused look that flitted briefly across his face.

"After all, it's not like you tried to kill me or anything like that, right?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Jonathan react to the remark, delivered with a casual chuckle worthy of an Academy Award. MacKensie frowned as though the words had more meaning for him than they should have held. The moment passed with a disgusted shake of his head and eyes rolled heavenward in a silent plea for patience, and only then did Benny dare to take his next breath.

"You're taking this awfully well," Jonathan realized with some confusion, squinting at Benny suspiciously.

Benny shrugged, regretting that he couldn't possibly explain or make Jonathan understand the truth behind his philosophical acceptance of seeming disaster. The mystery that had haunted his life for forty years had culminated tonight in a memory that would banish the nightmares forever — the memory of a soft kiss on his cheek, simple words of gratitude spoken in a lilting voice, and blue eyes shining with unshed tears of joy and grief. To accept the destruction of years of work in order to have saved a life like that ... was that really so much of a sacrifice compared to the one that a strange man who called himself Silver made in pursuit of the same goal?

At least Benny had the comfort of knowing he could salvage something out of what was left.

"That's the way it goes, Jonny," he sighed. "You win some ... you lose some."

Unconvinced, Jonathan stared a moment longer, then gave up with a dolorous shake of his head. "I'll never understand you," he muttered.

"That makes two of us, pal," he grinned. "Come on, I'm gonna get you home. Gotta get a good night's sleep, you know. Gotta be wide awake when the board members have us for lunch tomorrow."

"Wait, wait." A strange, distracted look came over Jonathan's face as he resisted Benny's attempt to help him to his feet. "There's something ... something I came here to tell you."

Benny eyed him. "Tell me what?"

"Odd." He touched his forehead, blinking hard. "I could have sworn ..."

Alarmed by the sudden loss of color in his friend's face, Benny crouched by his side to get a closer look at Jonathan's dazed expression. "Take it easy, you're getting upset ..."

"No, no, I'm fine, just ... confused." He drew in a deep, steadying breath. "I think I came here to tell you to...ask one of the physicists to go over the calculations for the primary induction process. There's a minor error affecting the stability of the higher temporal frequencies ..."

His words ended in a frown, telling Benny that the words made no sense to him, and distracting him from noticing the huge grin that broke over Benny's face. "And the flow ratio?" Benny prodded.

"Could use an adjustment," Jonathan breathed, eyes wide with blank amazement. "At onset, a richer mix with travidium, then compensate at peak by throttling back to point oh-oh-three ..." He broke off with a startled squeak.

"This is great, Jonny!" Benny exulted, clapping him on the shoulder. "Why, you've just solved a problem we

thought we'd never crack in our lifetime. Next year, on the podium in Sweden, you and me and the Nobel Prize!"

"I don't understand." Jonathan swallowed, fighting to keep from hyperventilating. "Why did I just say that? How on earth did I even know?"

"Maybe you just knew." Benny waved his fingers to suggest an unearthly connection.

Jonathan managed a rude snort.

"Okay, then. Maybe someone told you."

"Someone ..." Jonathan seemed to be scrutinizing a difficult memory. "Someone said to tell you ..."

Confusion lifted from Jonathan's eyes as he continued in a fainter voice, "He said to tell you ... thank you."

Tension left Benny in a rush, threatening his balance. He closed his eyes and released a long, relieved sigh. "Jonathan," he said, clapping his confused friend's shoulder warmly, "You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that. Believe me, you don't know."

Jonathan gave him a strange look that agreed wholeheartedly. "He also said to tell you ... sell your antiques."

Benny burst out laughing. "You see? You did read my mind. I was just today thinking that I'd really like to redecorate in Estonian-Modern. You'll help me with Rachel on that, won't you, old buddy, old pal?"

This time, Jonathan raised no protest when Benny urged him from the chair, out of the control room and back into the lab. "Benedek, when it comes to dealing with your wife, believe me when I tell you that I will gladly stand back and leave you hanging out to dry."

"Knew I could count on you," he chortled. "No, don't worry about the mess, we'll deal with it tomorrow."

At the door, Jonathan paused, lifting his hand as though trying to focus a stubbornly vague thought. "Who am I talking about?" he asked suddenly.

"Beats me," Benny lied cheerfully. "It's your hallucination, remember?"

Jonathan regarded him past lowered eyelids. "Curious," he murmured, taking a special interest in a spot on the wall past Benny's head. "I can only remember suffering a blackout like this one other time in my life. Thirty years ago, I believe. One moment I was on the phone to you, the next ... you were in my office, I was hyperventilating and the next morning they found my missing artifact in pieces on the walkway beneath my window."

"Whoa, nothing wrong with your long-term memory, eh, Jonny? Come on, let's ..."

Ignoring Benny's pull on his arm, Jonathan refocused on his friend's wary face. "The strange thing is that, for years afterward, I kept remembering something that never happened; someone I never met."

"Yeah?" Benny ventured after a moment.

His eyes took on a faintly wistful cast. "She was quite beautiful," he sighed.

Benny cleared his throat. "Since when am I supposed to think there's something strange about you dreaming about beautiful women?" he challenged, forcing a laugh.

"No reason in particular, except ... she was there. With him."

Benny carefully turned his head away from Jonathan's searching look. A moment passed in silence, broken when Jonathan said, quietly, "She said to tell you thank you from her as well."

The best he could manage was a nod and a non-committal sound in his throat. He started slightly when Jonathan's hand touched his shoulder, turning to meet his friend's concerned look. "Who's known me longer than anyone else?" he asked softly.

Benny pretended to think about it. "Well, I guess I've got Dr. Moorhouse beat by about six years now, but that's only because she didn't listen to me about cutting down on her caffeine intake."

"And who's known you longer than anyone else?"

His insouciant smile faltered. "That'd be you, I guess."

"I think I would very much like to hear what really happened here tonight," Jonathan told him, low-voiced.

"It's a long story, Jonny," he warned after a moment spent staring at a point past Jonathan's shoulder, helplessly watching all the pieces of a cherished facade shatter to the floor at his feet. For forty years he'd

carefully built and maintained that facade to shield the secret only he knew, that he was sure no one else would believe even if he could find that words to tell it. And no one else would believe, except ... except perhaps for someone who'd known him longer than anyone else. Someone who had, in fact, never really been fooled by that facade at all.

"Can't be nearly as long as I've waited to hear it," Jonathan replied, brow arched meaningfully.

Benny felt the relieved smile spread across his face as he nodded agreement. "Hungry?"

"Italian?"

"Naw." He quirked a knowing eyebrow. "Chinese. You know I only tell long, bizarre stories over Szechuan."

"Better than anyone else," Jonathan assured him with a smile.

Mary Bloemker is the editor of the fanzine, **The Temporal Times**, a celebration of time travel and travellers in the fourth dimension. For more information on **The Temporal Times** and Mary's other projects, send a SASE to her at 2655 6th Street NE, Birmingham, AL 35215-2707 (note this is a new address as of winter 1994).

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The X Files

Haunting Melody

by Deb Walsh

Chilmark, Massachusetts
on Martha's Vineyard
April, 1972

The streetlight on Vine Street reflected against the frost formed on the outside of the bedroom window, sparkling like mini-rainbows and magic prisms. Two children slept in beds across from each other, comforters pulled up tight to their chins. The boy, twelve-years-old, rolled over in his sleep, muttering, his dark thatch of hair tumbled in his closed eyes. His sister, eight-years-old, twisted her thick dark brown braid around her fingers in her sleep, pulling strands free and tangling them around her fingers. Her teddy bear, Mr. Rufus, was clutched tightly against her chest as she shifted in the small bed.

She shook her head slightly, a tiny furrow appearing between her dark brows. A soft moan sighed through her lips as she rolled over. A slow trickle of blood seeped from her ear, staining the starched white pillowcase. An identical line of blood leaked from both nostrils, and she snuffled uncomfortably.

A soft white light came from somewhere near the window, accompanied by a whisper of sound. The girl opened her eyes groggily, murmuring, "Who is it? Mommy?" She propped herself up on one elbow, and rubbed at her eyes with a fist. She called out softly to her brother, but heard only his even breathing in reply. The light, diffused and distant, seemed to be coming closer, and she called out to her brother again, louder this time. He opened his eyes, but didn't roll over, didn't get up to check on his sister. She sat up in bed, wiping her hand against the wetness on her upper lip, and stared at the dark blood, made darker in the strange light. The light grew brighter, brighter still, until she was squinting against the brilliance, and suddenly the room seemed filled with some ... presence. The little girl's voice grew louder, more panicked, as the presence seemed to advance on her. Again and again, she called her brother's name.

The light enveloped the room, and a soft voice spoke in the boy's mind. "Do not be afraid. No harm will come to her. One day, she will be returned."

Eyes open, but unable to see his sister, young Fox Mulder listened to his sister's calls for help, unable to move.

FBI Headquarters
Washington, D.C.
April 22, 1994

"Hey, c'mon, Scully, I'll buy you a beer," Fox Mulder offered as he and his partner, Dr. Dana Scully, closed down the office for the weekend.

Scully shook her head, wincing a little. "Sorry. I'd love to. But I'm having dinner with my mother." She shrugged into her coat, and Mulder stopped to help her.

"Still tough, huh?" he asked sympathetically. She nodded. Scully's father had died of a heart attack shortly after Christmas, and while the pain had dulled a little, it was still there, always present. Especially when she and her mother were together.

"I'd say it gets better, but ... well, you and your mom are strong people." He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

Scully smiled at him, buttoned her coat, and started out the door. He slung his over his forearm and was turning out the lights when the phone suddenly rang. They looked at each other, tensing. He nodded for her to go on; she shook her head and came back into the office, gesturing for him to answer the phone. Shrugging, he went back to the phone on his desk and picked up the receiver.

"Mulder."

The voice at the other end of the line was silent for a long moment, then it said, "They found her." Then the connection was severed, and Mulder was listening to a dial tone, stunned.

Scully could see Mulder's hand shaking as he put down the receiver, and the light reflecting from the corridor overheads revealed a face gone suddenly ashen. Trembling, her partner dropped into the chair by his desk, staring unseeing into the distance.

"Mulder?" she asked, her voice betraying her concern. "Mulder. Who was that?" No answer. Putting her briefcase down, she walked over to Mulder, shaking his shoulder. "Mulder! Who was on the phone?"

Slowly, as though waking from a long and drugged sleep, Fox Mulder turned to look at Dana. His eyes were unfocussed, his mouth slack. He looked like he was in shock. "Mulder?" she asked again, dropping into a kneebend and quickly checking his vitals. "Mulder, look at me. What is it?"

"My ... my sister," he answered at last, his voice hollow and whispery.

"Your sister," she repeated, frowning. "What about your sister?" Scully knew that Mulder's sister, Samantha, had disappeared 22 years earlier, taken from the room she had shared with Mulder. He had been 12 and she had been eight; despite an exhaustive search, no trace of the girl had ever been found. Scully knew that Mulder had felt responsible, an older brother committed to protecting a younger sister, and he still felt that sense of responsibility, that sense of failure. It was a trauma from which he'd never fully recovered, and hypnotic regression therapy had led him to believe that she had been abducted by aliens. Not long ago, that nightmare had been brought back into sharper focus, first by a similar disappearance in the Midwest, one of their earliest cases together, and then by the rantings of a young faith healer in the South.

Gradually, Mulder's eyes focussed, and he turned to look directly into Scully's. "They found her," he told her, shaking his head.

It was Scully's turn to shake her head. "Who? Who found her, Mulder? Who was that on the phone?"

He raised his hand to his mouth, absently pinching his lower lip between thumb and forefinger. "Uh ... um," he shook his head, as if to clear it. "Sounded like Owen Collings. Sheriff when I was a kid. I told him if anything ever came up, call me here." He reached out his hand to her, grasping her wrist. "Scully, I've got to go home."

"Your apartment."

"Martha's Vineyard. Chilmark. My home town." He shook his head again, struggling to rise. "I've gotta go."

"Not alone, you're not. You're in no state to drive."

"You've got dinner with your mother —"

"She'll understand. We can take my car —"

"Fly. It's 10 hours to Boston in good weather. We can get there faster by air if we take the shuttle."

"Mulder, there won't be a ferry to the Vineyard by the time we get there."

"So we get a coupla rooms on the Cape and catch the first ferry over in the morning," he suggested. The action of formulating a plan seemed to be bringing Mulder out of the shock the call had caused. Scully considered his proposal a moment, then nodded.

"Okay. Um, just let me get some things together and I'll meet you at your house —"

"No. I'll take you to your apartment, and then we'll go to my house. And I'll even let you buy me dinner — so long as it isn't McDonald's."

He smiled wanly at that and nodded. "Okay." She nodded and turned away to collect her briefcase. "Scully?" She turned back, expectant. "Thanks."

She smiled a tight smile and nodded. "Let's go."

"Mom, I know," Dana Scully said into the phone in Mulder's apartment. "I know. But we can get together for dinner next week." She listened to her mother's response impatiently. "No, there's nothing going on that you should know about," she answered, dropping her voice to a near whisper. While her mother made another protest over the phone, Scully glanced over at Mulder, who was stuffing papers into his suitcase. He shrugged, grinning a lop-sided grin, then went back to his packing. "No," she replied, her voice returning to normal pitch. "It's a family emergency." Another silence from Scully. "He's my partner, Mom." Another pause. "Yes, that's right, he's my friend, too. Look, I'll call you from Martha's Vineyard." She started tapping her high-heeled foot in exasperation. "No, I don't think the President's there right now. Look, Mom — I've got to go. We still need to pick up my things before we get on the road." Another interruption. "Yes, I'll be careful. I'll call you, okay? Don't worry." One last wait for her mother's response, and she answered, "I love you, too. Bye."

Mulder closed his suitcase and stood up, favoring her with one of his strange smiles. His color had improved, and he seemed more like his old self again. Scully was relieved. He still looked a little shell-shocked, but she wouldn't have to expend too much energy worrying about him. At least until they got to Massachusetts.

"Okay, pardner, let's hit the trail," he quipped.

Mulder was in the dining room, setting out plates for their Chinese take-out while Scully went through the file cabinet next to her computer, pulling out the copies of the files on Mulder's sister and his regression therapy. She was sure that he had stashed away documents from his apartment on the subject, too, but she had additional field notes that might be useful. She grabbed her laptop and a box of disks and brought them over to her suitcase along with the files.

"C'mon, Scully, your dinner's getting cold," Mulder called out.

"I'll be right there," she answered, closing the suitcase. Had she forgotten anything? Her holster and gun were lying next to the suitcase, and her FBI ID was in her pocket. She had clothes for the weekend, waterproof boots on her feet, and she was wearing comfortable travelling clothes. The computer and battery, along with disks and her micro-cassette recorder and extra tapes were packed away with the files. Yes. She had everything. "Coming!"

While they ate, they'd worked out the route from Boston to Wood's Hole where they would board the ferry to Martha's Vineyard. They caught the Washington-Boston shuttle at 8:00 and enjoyed an uneventful flight; Scully was pleased to see that Mulder's ability to nap had so far been unaffected. In Boston, they picked up a rental car, advice on the best Earth Day celebrations planned for the following day in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and drove south to Cape Cod.

In addition to Earth Day festivities, the clerk at the car rental pickup had also recommended an inn in Falmouth, right next to Wood's Hole. Mulder and Scully had argued briefly over how the accommodations would be paid for, and Mulder had won the argument by reminding her that this was a personal expedition on his behalf, not likely to be subsidized by the Bureau. With that detail settled, they followed the car rental clerk's directions, and checked in at the Admiralty Inn, taking the inn's last available room. Scully examined the list of amenities while Mulder paid for their rooms — a townhouse suite, in fact — for one night. "Mmm. Jacuzzi," she commented, smiling.

"And free HBO. All the comforts of home, Scully," he grinned, taking two keys from the desk clerk.

"And then some," Scully agreed, picking up her overnight bag.

The townhouse suite proved to be a two-level suite, with a bedroom on the second floor and a pull-out bed on the first floor. The bathroom was enormous, sporting a massive bathtub that doubled as a jacuzzi. Mulder claimed the pull-out bed and free HBO while Scully claimed the jacuzzi. When Scully came out of the bathroom, pleasantly shrivelled from a long soak in the whirlpool, Mulder was asleep, files still grasped in his hand. She looked at him a long moment, debating over taking the files away and pulling up the covers on her partner. Then, deciding that would probably wake him, she shook her head and climbed the stairs to the second-floor bedroom.

They got up early and ate the breakfast offered by the Inn, then packed up their meager belongings and hit the road toward Wood's Hole, where they waited for the ferry to take them across to Martha's Vineyard. Finally, just before noon on Saturday, they were driving on the island, headed toward Chilmark.

"Most of the tourist places are just opening up this time of year," Mulder was saying as he negotiated the road.

"Great. Does that mean we have to commute back to Falmouth at night?" Scully asked hopefully, remembering the Inn's jacuzzi.

Mulder shook his head. "No. Even if there are no openings in *any* of the inns on the island, we could always stay at my old place."

"So. Where *are* we staying?"

"We'll find out when we get there."

Scully shot Mulder a dirty look, but he just kept on driving.

Chilmark, Massachusetts
on Martha's Vineyard
April 23, 1994

Chilmark was a small town, typical of a tourist's idea of New England. Set back from the coast of the island, it was somewhat shielded from the raw winds that still whipped in off the ocean, despite the onset of spring.

They pulled up in front of a coffee shop on Chilmark's main street, and Mulder got out, going up to the meter

and giving it a knock on its "head." "No fee on Saturdays," he told her and went into the cafe. Scully shook her head, resettled her purse over her shoulder, and followed.

Inside the coffee shop, they were greeted by the delicious smell of fresh-brewed coffee and home-baked pies. Breakfast at the Admiralty that morning was quickly forgotten; the smell of those pies made Scully instantly ravenous. Mulder led the way to an empty table, took off his overcoat, and sat down. Scully had barely joined him when a waitress came over bearing a heaven-sent pot of coffee.

"As I live and breathe!" the woman exclaimed brightly. "Fox Mulder! Haven't seen you around here since you went off to college." The woman had bleached hair tortured into tight ringlets gathered on the top of her head and eyes outlined in heavy make-up; rouge several shades too dark for her complexion highlighted cheekbones that weren't there. Pancake make-up nestled in wrinkles the woman obviously preferred to ignore. She poured Mulder's coffee and scrutinized Scully with obvious interest. "Mrs. Mulder?" she asked archly.

Mulder chuckled, masking his wince over the woman's use of his unwanted first name. "Connie, this is Doctor Dana Scully, my partner. Scully, this is Connie Wilkins, proprietor of 'The Coffee Mug'."

Connie finished pouring Scully's coffee and put down the pot. She turned a brilliant smile on her and offered her a be-ringed hand. "Pleased to meet you," she told her, and Scully believed it was true; as soon as Mulder had established that she wasn't his significant other, the woman's attitude brightened immediately. She wasn't at all surprised at Connie's next statement.

"Good timing you coming back home, Fox. Amy's back in town — her divorce is final next month." With a possessive pat on Mulder's shoulder, Connie took up the coffee pot and went over to another set of customers in the shop.

Mulder was trying not to laugh as he studied the menu. Scully had to hold her hand over her mouth to avoid embarrassing them both.

"Amy?" she asked, a giggle escaping.

Mulder nodded, lips pressed tightly together to contain a chuckle. "Last I heard, Amy was on her fourth. Guess Connie's shopping around for Mr. Fifth."

"You still keep in touch with people around here?" Scully asked, shaking out her napkin; she was pleased to note that it was freshly-laundered linen, not paper. She rearranged her silver — genuine silver, it appeared, not stainless — and looked at the menu. Her mouth immediately started watering.

"I get a letter once a year from Owen," he agreed. "You know, the annual 'What I've Been Up To' Christmas message." He shrugged. "I send him a card, sometimes a note."

She glanced around her at the worn but clean linoleum tile, the carefully polished Formica countertop, the pressed linen tablecloths. The massive bay window looked out onto the street, lined with trees laden with fresh buds. "Nice place," she commented neutrally.

"Yeah, I guess," Mulder agreed without enthusiasm.

Connie returned at that point with two salads, placing one in front of each of them. Scully noted with amusement that Mulder's was twice the size of hers, and the croutons looked like they had been cut by hand. "Special today is chicken pot pie. You used to love that as a kid, Fox."

The tremor at the corner of Mulder's mouth was barely controlled as he nodded. Connie turned to Scully expectantly. "Oh. Sounds good to me. If Mulder liked it as a kid, that's a good enough advertisement for me." Connie nodded with satisfaction and stalked off again. Scully watched her retreat, and then let out a whoosh of air.

"I hate chicken pot pie, to tell you the truth. It was the only thing Amy knew how to cook in Home Ec."

"Well, just save room for desert — those pies look fabulous."

"No diet this weekend, Scully?"

She couldn't contain her mirth any further, and grinned at him. "Well, I always loved pie as a kid. Hold the chicken."

Mulder chuckled at that. Then his attention shifted to a point over her shoulder. She twisted around to see what he was looking at, and caught sight of a stocky, elderly man making his way up the sidewalk toward the coffee shop. A few moments later, the door opened, setting off the bell, and the man came into the shop, glancing around him. Scully looked at Mulder; he was sitting up straight, tense as a high-wire.

"Mulder," the old man greeted, walking over and extending a weathered hand to Mulder.

"Owen," Mulder greeted, and gestured for the man to join them.

"I see Connie's back in the match-making business. She spring that chicken pot pie on you again?" Owen asked as he pulled up a chair and settled his bulk.

Mulder nodded glumly.

"Cheer up. Amy went to cooking school a few years back. It's pretty good these days. And who's the pretty lady?" he asked bluntly, turning to Scully.

"Dana Scully. My partner."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Collings," Scully said, shaking his hand.

"Call me Owen. You got up here pretty fast, Mulder."

Connie returned with the coffee pot, a mug and a place setting for Owen, set down the utensils and filled Owen's mug, then returned to the counter. After she'd gone, Mulder replied, "That was a pretty mysterious call you made last night."

Collings nodded. "Well, I didn't have much time. No sense in going into the details over the phone — you'd've had to come up anyway as you're the only next of kin."

"She's dead, then. You found her body?" Dana inquired gently, her eyes on Mulder.

Owen shook his head. "Nope. Not dead. No body. But you gotta see this to believe it."

Edgartown, Massachusetts
on Martha's Vineyard
April 23, 1994

They had Connie Wilkins wrap up their lunches, bought a thermos of coffee, and Scully had a slice of pie packed up to go, and were soon on the road again with Owen Collings. They were on their way to Edgartown, 25 miles away, and the local hospital.

"Two nights ago, somebody saw lights on up at your old house. Well, light — there ain't no electricity on in the place this time of year 'cept for the boiler. Don't start renting it out until Memorial Day, usually. Brad Olsen — he's the sheriff nowadays — he cruised by and took a look. That's when they found her."

"I rent the place out to tourists in the summer," Mulder explained briefly. "Owen looks after it for me." Then to Owen, "Why do they think it's Sammie?"

"*They* don't. But I saw her. You ain't gonna believe your eyes, Mulder. Ain't aged at all. Looks just the same as she did when she disappeared 22 years ago."

That ashen look had returned to Mulder's face, and it was all Scully could do to keep herself from demanding the right to drive.

Sheriff Brad Olsen was waiting for them at the hospital. Owen had called him from The Coffee Mug and he'd gone out to meet them. The hospital was tiny by city standards, a white clapboard house with one room set aside as an examination room, another as a reception area, a third as an emergency room, and a fourth as a lab. Two other rooms were designated for in-patient care, but this time of year, they were usually empty. Where summer tourists seemed a sickly lot, the locals were made of sterner stuff. The remainder of the building was allocated to living quarters for the physician in charge. During the week, the hospital staff consisted of a full-time nurse, a receptionist, a lab technician, and the main physician and an assistant; on weekends, the staff rotated on an on-call basis.

Mulder pulled up in a parking place and turned off the ignition, then sat there for a long moment, breathing deeply.

"Are you okay, Mulder?" Scully asked, concerned.

He nodded curtly. "Let's go."

Olsen met them in the reception area, shaking hands with Mulder and eyeing Scully with interest. She studied him in return: he was shorter and huskier than Mulder, with thinning blond hair and a sheriff's uniform that stretched a little snugly over an expanding waist line; Scully guessed that he had been a high school athlete now tending toward fat instead of muscle.

"What do you think, Brad?" Mulder asked quietly.

Olsen broke off his scrutiny of Scully and shrugged. "I would never have noticed the resemblance until Owen showed me the old file." To Scully he explained, "Owen's still deputized and helps me out when I'm

short-handed. Nobody knows the old records like he does," he added with a nod toward Owen.

Scully nodded, then asked, "Do you believe that the girl you found is Samantha Mulder?"

Olsen let out a whistle. "Now, I don't know about that. She's been missing for 22 years. This girl can't be more'n eight. I know you believe in them UFOs," he said the acronym as a word, "but I sure don't, Fox. But there's no denying the resemblance."

"Can I see her?"

Olsen inclined his head in the affirmative, and gestured toward the in-patient room down the hall. "Fran says it's okay, so long as you keep it short."

As they walked down the hall, Mulder whispered to Scully, "Don't let that country bumpkin act fool you — Brad's a graduate of Harvard."

"Mmm," was Scully's reply.

Arriving at the indicated door, Mulder straightened his sweater, smoothed back his hair, and knocked. A small voice on the other side of the door replied, "Come in?"

With a glance at Scully, Mulder opened the door.

The child in the bed looked up, hugging a worn and mangy-looking teddy bear. She was about eight years old, with smooth skin the texture of cream, a heart-shaped face, and long dark hair and bangs. She looked up at the man in the doorway, her dark eyes solemn.

Mulder gasped, taking a step back. "Sammie. And Mr. Rufus."

"She was holding the bear when we found her. Don't know where she got it —" Olsen began.

"He's mine!" the little girl exclaimed. "Mr. Rufus is mine! Somebody hid him on me, and I found him." She looked down at the stuffed animal and smoothed its moth-eaten fur. "I'll take care of you now, Mr. Rufus." Then she looked directly at Mulder. "Where's my brother?" she demanded.

"C'mon, Mulder, take a deep breath," Scully was saying, patting his back. They'd gone back out to the waiting room when Mulder had nearly fainted, and the doctor, a blonde, tanned woman about Mulder's age, had rushed into the girl's room to calm the hysterics Mulder's performance had inspired.

"Jesus!" Mulder breathed, coughing. He sat back in the plastic seat with a thump.

"You okay now, Fox?" Brad Olsen asked. He seemed almost pleased by Mulder's weakness; he also consistently called Mulder by his first name, a name Mulder assiduously avoided. Scully filed the observation away, to be investigated later. Collings, on the other hand, was visibly concerned, and hovered worriedly.

Mulder shrugged off Scully's hands, trying to orient himself.

"Hell of a shock," Collings observed. "Kinda hit me the same way when I saw her."

The doctor joined them in the waiting room. "She's calmer now. She'll sleep for a little while. I've set up the monitoring equipment again, just to keep an eye on her. And how are you doing, Mulder?"

Did Mulder know everyone on this island? Scully shook her head. It was a small island, and Mulder probably had more than his share of notoriety.

"Fran," Mulder greeted, wiping his hand across his brow.

"So, it is her?" Fran asked, her tone argumentative.

"I don't know. You tell me," Mulder challenged, looking the woman square in the eye.

She smiled faintly and consulted the chart she carried. "Eight-year old Caucasian female, in reasonably good health —"

"Reasonably?" Scully repeated.

The doctor nodded. "Mmm. We sent blood and tissue samples to the mainland for DNA profiling, hair samples to the police in Wood's Hole, but we did find some oddities in the blood tests we ran here — her white cell count's a little high, there's a reduction in the lymphocytes population —"

"Effects of prolonged weightlessness," Scully echoed from a long-ago conversation with Mulder.

When the doctor looked at her curiously, she extended a hand to her, introducing herself. "I'm Special Agent Dana Scully, Mulder's partner. I'm also a medical doctor — I did my residency at Johns Hopkins."

"Fran Kulik. Did mine at Mass General. You're right about the symptoms matching those of prolonged weightlessness," Fran agreed with a nod. Then she turned her attention back to Mulder. "You don't really believe that it's really Sammie, do you? Seriously, Mulder?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. When do you expect the DNA profile back?"

"Next week some time."

"Can you get it rushed?"

She considered this a moment. "Well, I sent it to Mass Gen — I've still got plenty of friends on staff there ... I could pull a few strings and probably have it done this weekend. It'll cost you, though," she added with a grin. When Mulder didn't rise to the bait, she set the chart down and looked carefully at him. "Look, you don't too great — this has been quite a shock. Why don't you get some rest and come back later —"

"Do you think she'd respond to hypnosis?" Mulder interrupted her.

Fran didn't seem surprised or perturbed at Mulder's apparent rudeness, and nodded equably. "Well, sure, I don't see any reason why not, but —"

"Can you do it? I'd like to regress her. See what she remembers."

Kulik nodded thoughtfully. "Her memory does seem a bit sketchy. Doesn't seem to remember much before Brad found her in your old house. I can't do hypnosis, but Ben Williams can."

"Memory loss can be a symptom of UFO abductions," Mulder said quietly.

"Any distinguishing marks?" Scully asked, glancing at Mulder. He looked at her, but didn't pursue his thought.

"Um ... some odd scar tissue around the left ear," the attending physician replied, pointing to her own face, her fingers waggling vaguely at her own ear. "Her color's improving — she was very pale when she was brought in. Haggard-looking, really. Her lips were pretty badly cracked — they're about healed now. Malnourished, although not chronically. Her appetite's improving. I'd say the prognosis is pretty damned good."

"Has she asked for her parents at all?" Scully asked.

Fran shook her head. "I asked her if she wanted her parents, and she said they'd be mad at her for being gone so long. When I asked for their names and phone number, she said she couldn't remember."

Scully glanced at Mulder, who shrugged. "Why did she go into that house in particular?" Scully inquired.

Brad took the opportunity to answer. "She told me that's where she was left off."

"By?"

"'The Cloud Men'."

"Now, I won't take no for an answer, Mulder," Owen Collings was telling him. "Helen'll be happy to see you, and we've got two rooms free now the kids are all grown up."

Mulder didn't answer, and instead stared out the window at the greening trees whizzing by as they drove back toward Chilmark. Finally, Dana replied for them both, "We'd really appreciate it, Owen. Just let me know where to turn off."

A little while later, they arrived at the drive to the Collings home. Scully turned up the gravel driveway, wincing at every rut and stone the car hit on its way to the house. Finally, she pulled up in front of a sprawling stone house, a great mound of split wood piled up on the flagstoned porch. "Mulder, we're here," Scully told him softly, and he roused himself to get out of the car and help unload the luggage. Owen refused to allow Scully to carry anything, so she was left carting only her briefcase and their cold lunch from The Coffee Mug while the men carried the bags into the house.

Helen Collings was a cheerful woman in her mid-sixties, her hair a mixture of gray and dark brown. She seemed genuinely pleased to see them both, and shooed them away into the parlor while she fixed coffee. She liberated Scully's bag of food with, "Chicken pot pie? The dog loves it," and went back to the kitchen.

Scully shook her head, chuckling, as she followed Mulder into the parlor. It was a beautiful old room, with honey-colored hardwood floors, antique-looking braided rag rugs, and comfortable looking furniture. Mulder was looking out the window.

"What are you thinking, Mulder?" she asked him.

He didn't move, but he answered, "Be careful what you wish for. It might come true."

"Chinese proverb."

"Maybe a guide for living."

"Do you think she's your sister?"

"Maybe." He sighed, turning around to look at her with weary eyes. "We won't know until we get the DNA profile back."

Scully shook her head. "We won't know even then. We have nothing to compare it against."

Mulder nodded and was silent for a long time, turning back toward the window and watching the shadows lengthening across the ground. Suddenly he asked, "Could you develop a DNA profile from a lock of hair?"

Considering this for a moment, Scully nodded. "No. At least I don't think so. Not enough actual tissue to study. Why?"

"Then what?"

"Ah, blood, tissue samples, pulpy tooth matter ... none of it does us much good without a similar sample from your sister —"

Mulder was silent for a long moment, considering. When he did speak, his voice was shaky, and he swallowed repeatedly. "What about ... a blood stain? Blood dried on fabric?"

Scully considered this and nodded. "The blood stain could be used to create an aqueous solution which could be studied, sure. It's a method used frequently in forensic analysis. But you can't have something like that from your sister —"

"We've got something to compare it against," he replied flatly. The deadened quality of his voice was shocking, and Scully reached for the arm of the sofa and lowered herself onto the edge. He turned and looked at her. "Didn't your mother save your curls from your first haircut? Mine did."

"Every mother saves hair from that first haircut. It's in the manual," she joked, but not even a flicker of a smile answered her. "But I told you, hair won't do it," she added, shaking her head.

"But a blood-stained pillowcase would."

"A blood-stained pillowcase?" She frowned, staring at him. "Why — where is it?"

"In a safe deposit box in Edgartown. With the rest of Sammie's things. I put it there when I was 15."

"Why?"

He frowned, glanced out the window for a second, and moved into the room to sit down. "I never told you what happened to my parents."

She shook her head, watching him expectantly. He was on the edge, she could see, but she also knew that she had to let him work through this in his own way. She sat back on the sofa, waiting patiently for him to continue.

"I told you that after Sammie disappeared, it tore my family apart." She nodded. "What I didn't tell you is that it drove my mother mad. Every day, she seemed to get worse. She built a virtual shrine to Sammie. Nothing that had belonged to her could be moved. She wouldn't even launder the sheets on Sammie's bed, not even the pillowcase with blood on it — probably from a nosebleed or something, kids that age always get them. Possibly a nosebleed caused by proximity to aliens, I don't know. At first I agreed. I wanted her back just as much as my mother did. But as I grew older, her mood swings got wilder and wilder. And when I was fifteen, my father thought maybe if he got rid of all of Sammie's stuff ... maybe that would help. I begged him not to burn it all — finally he let me put it in a safe deposit box. I guess I missed Mr. Rufus."

"Mr. Rufus."

"The teddy bear. She always slept with him. When they took her ... he was left on the bed, tangled in the sheets. He must have been in the closet or up in the attic all these years."

"Until she found him. So the pillowcase, the one on her bed the night she disappeared — is in the safe deposit box?"

"Along with hair from her first haircut, her first tooth and her baby booties." He snorted softly. "Funny how a life can be reduced to just a few belongings, don't you think, Scully?" he asked, looking at her.

She lowered her eyes and nodded. Tears threatened, her own pain and loss too recent to ignore. When Mulder offered her his hand, she took it and squeezed hard.

ou're sure you want to do this?" Scully asked Mulder as they reentered the hospital.

"No. But it's got to be done." He expelled a breath and marched up the steps to the hospital doors.

Fran Kulik was working at the reception desk, going over a file. She glanced up at the two FBI agents and sketched a greeting. Reading for a few more minutes, she finally closed the file and put it in the file cabinet.

"Ben'll be here soon. She's had her dinner and she's doing pretty well. I've got the monitoring equipment set up, and everything's looking pretty good. I think the best course of action is to let Ben talk to her alone; when she's under, then you can come in and ask your questions."

Mulder nodded tautly. "Did you get through to your friend at Mass General?"

"Yeah. He said he can pull it off — he'll fax the initial results, and have the whole package sent over by ferry on Monday. Without a baseline to compare it to, however —"

"What kind of contacts do you have at the local BayBank?" Mulder interrupted her.

"Well, Joe Franken's the manager — you remember him from high school —"

"Good. Can I use your phone?"

She paused, then nodded. "Local call?"

"Joe. Got his number?"

"Let me get my book. Geeze, Mulder, you haven't changed, have you? Still a pain in the ass."

She left the reception area to look for her address book in her office. While she was gone, Scully commented, "And here I thought that was a rep you earned at the Bureau."

"Nah. It's a natural talent, goes way back."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

"Okay, here it is — 555-2732," Fran announced as she came back into the lobby with her address book in hand. She glanced at her watch. "He should be home by now. You want me to talk to him?"

Mulder shook his head and dialled the phone. While he spoke to his old classmate, Kulik led Scully away to her office talk to her privately.

"He looks a little better. But this is really rough on him."

"I know."

"Sammie's disappearance really tore apart his family. It's a wonder he didn't end up in juvie hall —"

"He told me about his mother. Where is she now?"

"Bourneville Hospital in Brockton. She's been chronic care now for over 10 years. She didn't recognize anybody before that, couldn't take care of herself. Y'know, his dad would've done anything to get him out of that house — if Mulder hadn't won the scholarship to Oxford, his father was prepared to sell the house if necessary to get him somewhere a long way from here. And as soon as Mulder got settled in England, his father committed his mother. He died shortly after Mulder got back." She shook her head in remembrance of the pain of the Mulder family.

Scully felt like she was prying into Mulder's secrets, but she knew he would never tell her these things — not that they were too personal, but that he would never put himself in the role of victim. But he had been, as much as his missing sister. And now ... if this wasn't Samantha Mulder, then someone was playing a mindgame of epic proportions with Mulder's head.

Mulder poked his head in. "Sorry to intrude, ladies, but Ben's here. And Joe said he'd let me into my box tomorrow after lunch. Oh, and Scully — don't believe a word she says. Kulik's always had it in for me, ever since I beat her in the fifth grade science fair."

Kulik chuckled at the memory, riposting with, "My project was pure science. Yours was pure pyrotechnics."

"Hey, how was I to know Mr. Kravitz was a volcano buff?"

Dr. Ben Williams was a psychiatrist who lived year-round on the Vineyard, but maintained a fashionable practice in Boston. Unlike so many people Scully had met so far, he had not gone to high school with Mulder, but like so many locals, had followed Mulder's career with interest.

"So, is this a big case, Agent Mulder?" he asked eagerly. He was a pudgy, older man, with a fringe of grizzled hair around his head, and a shiny dome on top. He was a friendly-looking man, the kind of man who could put patients at ease immediately.

"Skip the 'Agent' part and just call me 'Mulder'. And sorry, Ben. It's on file at the Bureau, but nobody but me would consider it a big case."

"An 'X-File'?" Williams guessed, his eyes shining.

Both Scully and Mulder did a double-take. "How do you know about the 'X-Files'?" they demanded in unison.

"Hey, I read the UFO journals. You'd be surprised how many of my patients have had traumatic experiences involving unexplained phenomena. I'm also a paid-up member of NICAP — you're one of their heroes. And you, Agent Scully — the great skeptic."

Mulder slapped the heel of his hand against his forehead as Scully chuckled. The world was becoming just too small a place these days. "Great."

"So, what's the drill?" Williams asked, rubbing his hands together with glee.

The softly droning voice of Ben Williams was all they could hear outside the door of the in-patient room. Mulder paced nervously, clenching and unclenching his hands as he marked off ten paces up, ten paces down the corridor. Fran Kulik was in her office, answering patient questions over the phone. Scully sat in the scarred plastic visitor's seat, trying to read the local evening paper and not pay attention to Mulder's incessant marching.

Finally, a soft beep sounded, and Mulder's hand shot to the device at his belt. They'd agreed that the little intercoms were the least obtrusive way for Ben to signal that he was ready for Mulder. Mulder looked over at Scully, his face pale, his mouth set in a tight line. She nodded and stood up. With a shaky thumbs up, Mulder led the way into the room.

The girl lay back on her pillows, her pale face framed by an aureole of dark hair fanned out on the pillow. The teddy bear, Mr. Rufus, was loosely held in the crook of one arm. Her eyes were closed, her breathing steady. Not turning around, Williams motioned for them to enter. Silently, Mulder sat in the chair next to Williams. Scully went around to the other side of the bed, near the monitoring equipment, and watched the telltales relating to heart rate and blood pressure. She turned back to Mulder and Williams, inclining her head to indicate it was okay to start the questions.

Swallowing hard, Mulder leaned forward, fighting down the urge to reach for the small hand laid on the comforter. Instead, he asked softly, "Are you comfortable?"

The little girl nodded silently.

"Where do you live?"

"2790 Vine Street in Chilmark, Massa ... Massachoosits."

Mulder drew a sharp breath. Then he asked, "What is your name?"

"Samantha T. Mulder."

"What does the 'T' stand for, Samantha?"

"Theresa. Like the Little Flower."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"A brother."

"And what's his name, Samantha?"

"Fox. I call him 'Foxy Loxy'."

Mulder's hand was visibly trembling. He lifted his eyes to stare at Scully, his expression a mute plea for help. Her eyes widened, her lips parting slightly. Then she frowned toward the child. Mulder returned his attention to the girl in the bed.

"How old are you, Samantha?" he asked softly.

"I'm eight and one-quarter."

"One-quarter?"

"That's what my brother told me. One-quarter of a year since my birthday."

Mulder nodded dully. "When is the last time you saw your brother?"

Silence.

"Samantha? What was your brother doing the last time you saw him?"

Silence again.

Williams patted Mulder on the arm, gesturing to him to try again. Mulder nodded, and tried a new tack. "Samantha, you are perfectly safe. No one will harm you. You're here with us and we're going to look after you. No one can get you. I want you to remember the last time you saw your brother. Think of it as a dream, something that happened to someone else. Can you do that, Samantha?"

A nod, small but definite.

"Good. Now. Where are your parents, Samantha?" Mulder asked, glancing toward Scully and the monitoring equipment. Scully nodded back; the indicators remained steady.

"In their room, sleeping. I think I can hear Daddy snoring."

Mulder smiled faintly at that. His father had suffered from a deviated septum, and his snoring had been epic in volume. "Now, you can see your brother, right?" Another nod, more vigorous this time. "Where are you?"

"I'm in my bed. In our room."

"Very good. And where is your brother?"

"He's in his bed."

Mulder paused, taking a deep breath. "Is there anyone else in the room?"

"Yes."

"Who else is in the room, Samantha?"

"The Cloud Man."

"Who is the Cloud Man?"

"I'm not supposed to tell."

Mulder exchanged glances with Scully and Williams. Williams shrugged and nodded toward the girl. "Keep going," he mouthed silently.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Mulder expelled a breath. Then he resumed. "What is the Cloud Man doing in your room, Samantha?"

"He's come to take me away to the clouds."

"Are you afraid of the Cloud Man?"

Silence.

"Does the Cloud Man do something to frighten you?"

"Yes."

"What does the Cloud Man do, Samantha?"

"He ..." She clutched at the comforter, her hand balling up into a fist while in the other she hugged Mr. Rufus closer. "He ..."

"You're safe now, remember? The Cloud Man can't hurt you. What does the Cloud Man look like, Samantha? Can you describe him for me?"

"He's ... light. Bright. Like an angel. Like my guardian angel."

"Is that who he is, your guardian angel?"

"No." A whimper.

"What does the Cloud Man do?"

"He ... Fox! Fox! Fox!" she screamed, bolting up in bed, clutching Mr. Rufus to her chest. Again and again she screamed the name, legs and arms flailing in panic. Finally, Williams leapt up and grabbed her by the shoulders, whispering soothingly to her as he eased her back onto the bed. He cocked his head toward the door, indicating Scully and Mulder should leave. With a glance back at the gradually calming girl, they left the room.

Fran Kulik was waiting for them in the corridor. "Is she all right?"

"Ben's getting her calmed down," Scully assured her, steering Mulder toward the coffee pot. He was still shaking, his face so pale, she could trace the blue of his veins in his forehead.

"Hot sweet tea," Kulik agreed, guessing Scully's intent and drawing hot water into a mug and dumping a tea bag and a couple of teaspoons of sugar into it. She stirred it quickly and shoved the mug into Mulder's trembling hands.

Mulder only spilled a few drops bringing the mug to his lips, and took a sip of the hot liquid. "Hot," he complained.

"That's the idea, idiot," Fran chided. "Look, sit down in my office — the couch is more comfortable than these buckets." With Scully on one side and Kulik on the other, he allowed himself to be led to Kulik's office.

By then, Ben was coming out of the room and closing the door gently behind him. "Good idea," he approved, looking at the steaming mug of tea. "Mind if I do ...?" Fran nodded, and he scurried off to make himself some tea. A few moments later, he rejoined the others, sipping thoughtfully while they waited for Mulder to gather his thoughts.

"It could be her," he said at length.

"Could. But you're not convinced," Ben amplified.

Mulder shook his head. "There was nothing in her answers that was specific enough —"

"Your nickname —" Scully suggested.

"What would you do with a name like 'Fox'?" Mulder countered with a glimmer of his usual humor. "Especially if you're only eight years old? And why do you think I asked my parents to call me 'Mulder'?"

With a faint smile, Scully nodded agreement. "And Theresa's a common name, a good guess for the initial 'T'. Was that your sister's middle name?"

Mulder nodded. "But everything she said, it all comes from public record. My statement at the time. Standard UFO literature. I ... I just don't have enough to go on," he added sadly, shaking his head.

Scully considered this in silence, as the others did. Finally, she offered, "It's been a long day. And you've been through a considerable trauma, Mulder. I suggest we all get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll get that pillowcase and prepare it to send back to Boston. Okay?" At Fran's quizzical expression, Scully quickly explained about the pillowcase, and she could tell from the thoughtful frown on the resident doctor's face that she found it a curious thing for a mother to save, but in keeping with Mrs. Mulder's monomania.

"Scully's right. Sleep will do you some good. Now get out of here so I can do the same!" Fran ordered.

Murmurs of assent from all three of them met the suggestion, and they all got up to disperse.

"I'll call you if anything changes," Fran promised, seeing them all to the door. "And button up that coat, Mulder — you've had a hell of a shock, you don't want to compound it."

"Yes, mother," Mulder agreed with a smile, and duly buttoned his overcoat and wound his muffler around his neck. "Satisfied?"

"Get a hat. You know you lose 80% of your body heat through your head. Now get some sleep."

Williams, Scully and Mulder all left the hospital, and Fran turned to bolt the door after them.

"Keep me posted, okay?" Williams asked as he climbed into his car.

"Sure. Thanks again, Ben," Mulder called as he started to open the driver's side door. Scully tapped him on the shoulder and shook her head, pointing meaningfully at the passenger's side. Shrugging, he trudged around the car and let himself in on that side while Scully slipped in behind the wheel.

"This thing isn't paid for yet, Mulder. I'm not taking anymore chances with it tonight, even if it *is* on *your* credit card."

Leaning back in his seat, he closed his eyes and raised an arm, pointing. "Home, James."

Scully simply gave him a wry smile and put the car in gear.

Scully had learned long ago that humor — often strange, sometimes smelling of the gallows — was Mulder's way of coping with the world. As defense mechanisms went, it was a pretty harmless one, and it kept their working relationship from ever getting boring or repetitive. But except for a few attempts at humor back at the hospital, Mulder had been silent, brooding. Scully had to admit that she hadn't a clue how she might deal with a similar situation; in fact, her bizarre "visions" following her father's death had left her badly rattled, doubting her own sanity. Mulder seemed to be handling the entire affair pretty well, all things considered, but that didn't prevent her from worrying about the long-term effects.

What also concerned her was the possibility that the little girl in the local hospital might actually be Mulder's sister. If they managed to prove that she was ... Scully would have to reorient her entire view of the world, natural and unnatural. And she was too much of a professional to fail to attest to the accuracy of the claim if the DNA profiles matched. Validation from a respected FBI agent — and an accredited physician, at that — would fuel a furor such as the Bureau hadn't seen since J. Edgar's days.

But what frightened her most was the possibility that this was *not* Samantha Mulder. If she wasn't — and even Mulder wasn't convinced that she was — then who was she? Where had she developed this belief that she was? Where had she gotten even the scanty details she had recounted under hypnosis? And just who was behind it?

Scully shook her head. And she called Mulder "paranoid." She was beginning to see conspiracies in every shadow.

Mulder had gone directly to the room the Collingses had given him, claiming a very real fatigue. Scully had gone to her own room and changed for bed, and now she sat up in the lovely old bed, staring at the blank screen of her laptop. No field notes tonight. Her impressions were far too jumbled, her conclusions far from reliable. Tomorrow was soon enough to try to start making sense of it all. With that thought, she switched off the computer, closed the case and placed it on the nightstand, and turned off the bedside lamp. Within minutes, she was fast asleep.

Down the hall, Fox Mulder stared at his reflection in the mirror, looking for signs of the little boy who had heard but not seen his sister's abduction 22 years earlier. Ever since that day, he'd hoped for her return, believed that today, today would be the day, only to go to sleep that night disappointed. But today ... was today the day of her return? Was that child, that child who looked just like Sammie, his long-lost sister? The superficial evidence indicated that she might be. Then why couldn't he believe what he'd hoped for so long?

Making a face to himself in the mirror, he turned away, pulling off his sweater. He was open to extreme possibility. But he was too rational to believe without proof. Wouldn't the guys at the Bureau be amazed to learn *that*? Shaking his head, he slipped under the covers and turned out the light, but sleep eluded him for a long time. Finally, he slid into a light doze, then a deeper sleep, his dreams full of light-filled rooms and his sister's voice.

Fran Kulik called the Collings house early Sunday morning, certain that Owen and Helen would be up at the crack of dawn. Helen answered the phone, and listened carefully as Fran outlined her concerns. Nodding, Helen agreed. When she put the phone down, she answered Owen's questioning eyes.

"That was Fran. She said to let Mulder and Dana sleep in. Mulder had a rough night last night, and she thinks he might have had trouble sleeping."

Owen considered this as he chewed his toast. "Heard 'em come in last night. Then I heard Mulder wandering around Bill's old room. She's probably right — that boy always did feel things too deep."

Helen sat down and took a sip of coffee. "That whole family did. This is a terrible business, Owen," she added, reaching for his hand.

He closed his own large, calloused hand over her smaller, smoother one. "That it is, Helen. That it is."

It was nearly 11 when Scully got out of the bathroom, her hair turbanned in a towel and a scruffy old bathrobe tied at her waist. Mulder was just opening the door to his room, peering out bleary-eyed and disheveled.

"What time is it?" he croaked.

"Almost 11. You've got time for a shower before lunch." She looked at him closely. "You look like hell, Mulder."

"Thanks. I feel like hell. Is that coffee I smell?"

Scully had to smile. First things first: caffeine. "Downstairs. Helen and Owen ate hours ago, but they had orders to let us sleep in."

"Fran?"

"Mmm-mm. Go get your fix, Mulder — you're useless until you've had some coffee."

"Well, at least I'm not useless all of the time — you should let Blevins know," he called over his shoulder as he stumbled toward the stairway. Scully shook her head, grinning. Then she remembered her field notes — their Section Chief, Blevins, *would* know.

As Mulder swallowed the last bite of his lunch, he announced to Helen, "You've got to let me take you out to dinner while I'm here, Helen. You pick the place. You're too good to us."

"Oh, come on, Mulder. You're family. You were best man at Bill's wedding. I'd've been insulted if you'd stayed anywhere else," she replied, getting up to clear the lunch dishes away.

"Let me," Scully offered, picking up plates and silverware.

"No, that's fine," Helen told her, shooing her away. "It's Owen's turn to wash up. Keeps him in line," she added with a twinkle.

Owen pushed away from the table with a grunt. "That's what you think," he complained, but he gathered up the dishes and cutlery and disappeared into the kitchen with Helen.

"You have nice friends, Mulder," Scully told him.

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. I do." Then he glanced down at his watch. "You ready?"

The Edgartown BayBank office was closed on Sundays, except for the ATM attached to the lobby, but Joe Franken had already opened the doors and was waiting inside for them. He greeted Mulder with genuine pleasure, and politely introduced himself to Scully. Then he presented Mulder with an official-looking form to sign.

"You still have your key, or do I need to go find a copy?" Franken asked.

Mulder dangled his keys in front of Franken, smiling. "I never leave home without it." Then he signed the form and pushed it back to Franken.

"Okay. Let's go."

The safe deposit vault was guarded by an old steel gate, then a combination lock on the door of the vault itself. The bank had a comfortable, old-fashioned look to it; obviously the rage of renovation and modernization rampant in big-business banks had not yet reached here to Edgartown. Finally, Franken led them into the vault, and took out Mulder's safe deposit box. It was a large box, and took up a significant portion of the top of the table in the vault. "You want us to wait outside?"

Mulder shook his head, fitting his key into the lock. He paused before opening the box, steadying himself with a deeply-drawn breath. Then, he lifted the lid.

Inside the box were, as he'd told Scully, baby booties, a small envelope containing a lump the size of a small tooth, a baby doll, hair ribbons, and all manner of impedimenta of a young girl. Mulder extracted a Zip-Loc baggie, holding it up. A lock of dark hair, slightly waved, was held within. He started to shove it into his pocket, then looked at Scully. He handed her the baggie in silence, then reached into the box again, shifting the contents to pick up the edges of a pillowcase that had once been white. He flicked his wrist and shook it out, holding it up. Amidst the folds pressed into it by almost 20 years, there were two small brown marks and a larger smear of the same color. Blood stains.

He handed it to Scully, and then simply looked at the contents of the box for a long time, his expression melancholy. Then he sighed, and closed the box, locking it, and handed it back to Franken.

"That's it? Just a lock of hair and a pillowcase?" Franken asked, amazed.

"The blood stain on the case should be enough to do a DNA profile to test against this girl's," Scully explained. While the lock of hair couldn't be used for DNA profiling, it could be used to compare against the girl's. And, she suspected, there was more than a bit of sentimentality involved in taking the hair out of the safety deposit box.

"Wow. Modern technology," Franken breathed, shaking his head as he returned the box to the vault. Then he led them out again, locking up behind him.

At the door to the bank, he shook Mulder's hand again, nodding to Scully. "Let me know what happens, okay, Mulder?"

"Sure, Joe. And thanks."

Their next stop was the hospital, where Fran was already at work. Already this morning she'd had to deal with a broken leg and an ulcer attack, but right now she was enjoying a quiet interlude. At Scully and Mulder's entrance, she looked up and smiled wearily.

"Get enough rest last night?" she asked.

"Mmm. Especially after you told Helen and Owen to let us sleep in."

"Damn that Helen — can't keep a secret," she complained, grinning.

"Actually, it was Owen," Mulder pointed out, returning the smile.

She motioned them into her office and closed the door. As they sat down, she informed them that her part-time nurse was looking after the girl. "Did you get the pillowcase?" she asked.

Scully nodded, and brought out the linen, handing it to Fran. "Good. I'll prep it to send to Mass General on the ferry tomorrow." She fingered the fabric, studying the stains. "Hopefully this will be enough to pull a sample." Then she put the pillowcase down on her desk and rummaged for a large envelope. "I thought you might like to see these — they just came back from the lab," she explained, handing a large manilla envelope to Scully.

As Scully opened the envelope, she asked, "What are they?"

"Photographs we took of her when she was brought in. There's some detail on the scar tissue you might want to examine."

"Anything from Mass General?" Mulder asked as he peered over Scully's shoulder.

"Don't get pushy, Mulder. My friend is pulling out all the stops to get the stuff here by tomorrow."

"Hmm," Scully murmured, studying the photographs. She handed one to Mulder while she looked closely at another. "Mulder — look at this scar —"

Behind the left ear, a small triangular scar marred the smooth surface of the young skin.

"Click. Another piece falls into place," Mulder said acidly.

"You've seen that kind of scar before," Kulik stated.

Mulder nodded. "It's consistent with the abduction theory — there've been several cases of this type of scar being found on victims who claimed they were abducted. And at least one on a man who didn't know he had been," he added with a glance at Scully. She frowned in response, remembering poor Max Fennig, the epileptic man from NICAP who'd died mysteriously in Townsend, Wisconsin.

"Now this looks interesting," Scully commented, tracing her finger along the next photograph. "Fran, look at this," she told her, handing her the photo.

"What am I looking for?" Fran asked, puzzled.

"Look at the hairline along the temple and around the ear."

Fran took the photo over to her desk and turned on the lamp, holding the photo up. "Tiny scars ... like ..."

"Like plastic surgery. Very good plastic surgery, I might add."

"Are you suggesting that that child was altered to look like Sammie?" Fran demanded, incredulous.

"I'm offering it as a possibility. Mulder?"

"Some abduction cases have exhibited faint scarring around the face and hands. Presumably the result of some sort of medical procedure, tests maybe. It could go either way," he shrugged.

Mulder looked at another photograph for a long time, his face unreadable. The photo was a full-face view of the girl. He lifted his hand and touched his fingers to the image. Then he looked up at Fran. "Do you think she's in any condition to leave the hospital — for a short time?"

"Why? What have you got in mind?" Kulik asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"I'd like to take her out to my old house, walk around with her — see if that jars anything loose."

"Return to familiar surroundings?" She considered this for a moment, then nodded. "We can ask her. Karen can go with you, just in case. If you keep the visit short, and make sure she stays bundled up, she should be okay. She's sleeping now, but later ... sure."

"Good."

Mulder spent the time waiting for "Samantha" to awaken by making phone calls on his cellular from Kulik's examination room while Scully took the opportunity to catch up on some of Fran's medical journals. He was sitting on the examination table, his shoeless feet crossed at the ankles.

"Yeah, Roscoe, I know it's Sunday," Mulder was saying. "Your day of rest. I know."

"Don't you ever rest, Mulder?" Roscoe Breskin, his partner in the operation mounted over the Scully kidnapping a few months earlier, asked. Officially, the perpetrator in the case has been a felon named Lula Phillips, who had held both Scully and Agent Jack Willis hostage. Mulder's command of the operation had gone a long way to reestablish his credentials with many of his colleagues at the Washington Bureau, most especially Breskin.

"No, I never rest, except when the Skins are in town. You know that. Okay, it'll cost me — how much?" Mulder listened to Roscoe Breskin's price and whistled. "I hope you're worth it, Roscoe," he told his fellow agent at the other end of the connection. "Yeah, yeah, that's what they all say."

"Okay, Mulder. You've got my attention. What do you want?"

"I want a trace run — no, not a phone trace," he amended at the strangling noises coming through the phone. "I want a computer trace. I need to know who's accessed a file."

"An 'X-File'?" Roscoe asked, chuckling.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I know how you feel about them, Roscoe, but this one's personal."

"Your sister?" Breskin guessed, his tone turning serious.

"Yeah. My sister." Quickly, Mulder outlined what had occurred so far, ending with, "Something doesn't smell right about this." At the snort Roscoe greeted that statement with, Mulder added, "I know — none of the X-Files smell right to you. But this girl ... she looks like my sister, she even sounds like her ... but her story — it's too pat."

"You think someone's accessed the file and is using the information to set you up? C'mon, Mulder, that's conspiracy shit."

"Which would you rather believe, Roscoe — that my sister's been returned by aliens, or somebody's been hacking into Bureau files?"

Roscoe whistled in response to Mulder's challenge, and Mulder held the phone away from his ear, rubbing at the ear absently. "You've got a point. What's the file number?"

"6 007. There are some tapes that go with it, too."

"What's the time frame?"

Mulder considered this for a moment. He'd opened the file more than three years ago. Official attention had been directed at him about a year later. "Two years. Twenty-five months, really. Since Scully's been working with me."

"You don't suspect her?"

"Not on your life. But that's about when Blevins started sitting up and taking notice."

"You think this could be internal?"

"You know McGrath," Mulder reminded him, thinking of the Section Chief in charge of the Office of Professional Responsibility who'd tried to crucify him not too long ago with a disciplinary hearing that almost ended in his being thrown out of the Bureau on criminal charges.

"Hmm," Roscoe agreed thoughtfully. "Okay. You've got it. Where can I reach you?"

Mulder gave his cellular number, along with Owen Collings' phone number. "Thanks, Roscoe," he said.

"You get those tickets, and we're square. If not ... I'll take it out of your hide in unpaid overtime."

"Deal." Mulder said goodbye and closed the connection. The next number he dialled was his home number, and he punched in the sequence to retrieve his messages. Not surprisingly, the calls were few, but one in particular caught his attention. Two clicks, then

dial tone. His government source. Shit. He couldn't call him from here, he'd never answer the phone. And he might just know something about this; the timing was just too coincidental otherwise. Making a mental note to get in touch with the man as soon as he got back to D.C., he hung up and laid back on the examination table to take a nap.

A soft tap on the door brought Mulder to immediate wakefulness. He sat up straight, banging his head into the examination lamp, and rubbing his head painfully, called out, "Who is it?"

Fran poked her head inside. "She's up. And she's willing. Are you really up for this, Mulder?"

He nodded, pulling his shoes back on. His cellular phone was still sitting on the examination table as he left.

Mulder led "Samantha" out to the car, with the part-time nurse, Karen Jenkins, bringing up the rear. Scully had agreed to stay back at the hospital in an effort not to overwhelm the girl.

At loose ends, Scully started to straighten up the reception area, piling magazines into neat stacks.

"If you want to be really helpful, you can help me strip her bed," Fran offered with a smile.

"I thought I put all this behind me when I joined the Bureau," Scully commented.

"Once a doctor, always a doctor," Fran reminded her. "Coming?"

Scully was surprised to note that the infamous Mr. Rufus had been left behind, casually dropped on the floor. She picked up the bear and set him in the visitor's chair, smoothing down his tufted fur. Then she walked over to the bed and lifted one of the pillows to strip off the pillowcase. As she pulled off the case, she started to dust off a few strands of hair, then stopped, pulling the hairs off and twisting them in her fingers. She stood there, staring thoughtfully at the hairstrands in her hand.

"Something wrong?" Fran asked, straightening from where she was pulling the sheets away from the bed.

Scully started to say something, then shut her mouth with a snap. She tilted her head slightly, staring more closely at the hair. She patted her pocket, where the baggie containing Samantha Mulder's lock of hair rested. Finally, she looked up. "Do you have a microscope?"

"Silly question. This *is* a hospital, small as it is. Why?"

She extracted the baggie and held up both the strands of hair from the pillow and the lock of Sammie's hair. "I meant to do a comparison earlier." She frowned at the hand holding the strands. "Something doesn't feel right."

"Sensitive fingers. You oughta be a doctor."

Scully grinned in reply.

"C'mon."

Mulder guided the car into the driveway, turned off the ignition, and pulled a flashlight out of his pocket. "Ready?" he asked.

The girl in Karen's lap nodded solemnly, looking up at Mulder with huge eyes. Mulder smiled at her and opened his door.

At the front door, he unlocked the lock and let them into the house. The house was silent, chilled, and musty, having been closed up since the end of the summer season. Except for when Brad Olsen had found the girl wandering here. Once inside, Mulder crouched down in front of the girl and asked softly, "Do you remember where you were when got here?"

She nodded silently, her eyes large and curiously mature.

"Can you show me?"

She nodded again. "Now?"

"Now."

While Scully examined samples of the girl's hair alongside samples of Mulder's sister's hair under the microscope, the phone rang, and Fran left her in the lab to answer it in her office.

"All right, Fran, April Fool's was weeks ago — what's the deal?" demanded a surly masculine voice on the other end of the line.

"Marc. What the hell are you talking about?" Fran asked, settling into her chair and lifting her feet onto her desk. The man on the phone was Marc Kammenstein, her friend at Massachusetts General Hospital doing the DNA profile tests.

"I'm talkin' about the sample you sent me — what's it from, an orangutan?"

"Look, I know there are some oddities in the blood, but —"

"Oddities! C'mon, Fran, come clean —"

Fran slid her feet off the desk and leaned forward in her chair, frowning. "Wait. I sent you a blood sample taken from an eight-year-old girl who was found wandering around the site of an alleged UFO abduction 22 years ago. The girl looks exactly like the girl who disappeared — exactly the way she looked 22 years ago. I admit it's weird, but I ran preliminary tests on a similar sample here, and all I found was increased lymphocytes and decreased white cells. What did you find?"

Marc was silent for a long time, long enough for Fran to prompt, "Marc, are you there?"

"Yeah, Fran. I'm here. I'm gonna fax the results to you and you can tell me if what you tested is human. *Homo sapiens*, I mean."

"Marc, you're scaring me ..."

"I'm scaring myself. Look at the results and call me back. I'm sending it through now," he added, and she could hear the line to her own fax ringing in the reception area, stereoed with the sound of electronic connection from the opposite end. "And Fran?"

"Yeah?" she asked, watching the fax extrude from the fax machine through the open door connecting her office to the reception area.

"You have any kind of weapon — a gun, mace, anything out there?"

"I've got myself a pair of FBI agents, actually. Why?"

"Because if what I think I see in this test is true, you've got one hell of a potential problem on your hands. You make sure you keep those agents close while you're working with that ... girl? And call me back."

"Sure, Marc. Bye," she added, her attention focussing on the document dropping into her receive tray. She hung up the phone and walked out to the fax machine, picking up the papers and scanning them quickly. Then she grew impatient for the remaining pages to transmit, because the picture the data painted was a frightening one.

Scully snapped off the light on the microscope in disgust. She bagged the samples and labelled them and, stuffing them in her pocket, left the lab to find Fran. She nearly collided with the doctor as Fran rushed through the door to the lab.

"The girl's hair is artificially colored — dyed," Scully told her, just as Fran blurted, "This kid's got 56 chromosomes."

"What?" they demanded in unison. Fran shook her head and shoved the fax printout at Scully. "Read this," she ordered.

Scully read through the report quickly, her eyes widening with alarm. "Extra chromosomes at 4, 5, 12, 16 and 22 ... oh, my God," she breathed in horror.

"You recognize this chromosomal pattern?" Fran said in disbelief. "What is it?"

Scully's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, then she shook her head. "I've got to make a phone call first. I've got to confirm this —"

"So call already," Fran agreed, making shooing motions with her hands.

"You call Brad — have him go out to Mulder's house," she ordered as she punched the numbers into her cellular phone. "And call Mulder on his cellular," she added, reeling off the number. Fran ran back to her office to make the calls. Scully held the phone against her ear with her shoulder as she grabbed her purse and pulled out her gun and arm holster.

Scully was buckling the holster on when she said, "I'd like to speak to the warden, please. Yes, I know it's Sunday, but this is an emergency. I'm Special Agent Dana Scully of the Washington Bureau." She continued with her security clearance, and the special clearance she and Mulder had received in order to visit the Whiting Institute for the Criminally Insane last year. The man at the end of the line made respectful noises, and then put her on hold. She pulled her weapon out of the holster and checked the rounds while she was

waiting. Satisfied that all was in order, she slid the weapon back into its berth, and reached for her coat.

"Agent Scully," greeted a husky, male voice on the other end. "I am Warden Thompson. What can I do to assist the Bureau?"

"Warden Thompson, there are three inmates in your facility, products of the Litchfield Experiments — Eve 6, Eve 9 and Eve 10."

"Ah. There *were*. Eve 6 is still here, but Eve 9 and Eve 10 were broken out of the facility several months ago." He paused, and Scully felt the floor go out from under her. She maneuvered herself to a chair and sat down. The Warden's voice dropped to a confidential tone. "Quite honestly, Agent Scully, it's a disgrace. The previous warden and the security staff were reprimanded and replaced. In fact, several of them face criminal prosecution. I only took over about a week ago. You see, there was a cover-up. Two guards were killed, and another critically wounded — she may never walk again. The escape was not reported, and was only discovered during a snap inspection. As you know," he added, and she knew he was consulting the file on the capture of the two psychotic, genetically-engineered eight-year-olds from the way he spoke, "these 'girls' are extremely dangerous. You and Agent ... ah, Mulder, are among the few to survive contact with them from the outside world."

"So they're free. Well, Warden, I think they may be on Martha's Vineyard. And at least one of them may be with Agent Mulder right now."

Thompson was silent. When at last he spoke again, there was steel in his voice, a voice confident in its authority. "I'll contact the appropriate authorities, Agent Scully. There'll be a squad at the ferry dock on the mainland. And I think air support to Martha's Vineyard would not be too extreme a response, don't you think?"

"You're right, sir, I don't. We've called the local law enforcement officials, and I think I'd better join them. Tina and Cindy have every reason to wish Mulder harm."

"I agree, Agent Scully. Good luck."

Scully severed the connection and stuffed the cellular phone into the pocket of her coat. Fran was shrugging her own coat on as she came out of her office. "No answer on Mulder's phone — he's probably in the house and didn't bring it in with him. But Brad's on his way. I had to call around to find him, but he's calling up back-up from Edgartown and a couple of other towns here on the island." She paused to drop something into her medical bag, then snapped it shut, looking at Scully expectantly. "You ready?"

"I can't take you with me —"

"You can't get there without me — it's my car."

Owen had turned the electricity off once the summer season had ended, although the boiler was on a separate circuit to ensure some heat had kept the pipes from freezing and bursting during the long winter. As a result, Mulder played his flashlight on the stairs to light the way, despite the fact that outside, it was mid-afternoon. Karen Jenkins trailed behind Mulder and the girl, glancing nervously over her shoulder. In the lead, "Samantha" trudged up the stairs silently. All three had kept their coats on, and their breaths created little puffs of fog as they breathed.

The house was silent, save for the subtle squeaks and groans typical of old buildings, and the soft footfalls on the carpeted stairs. At the head of the stairs, the girl stopped, staring into space. Mulder stepped up behind her, with Karen still standing a few steps down.

"What is it?" Mulder asked softly.

The girl raised an arm and pointed. Following the direction of her finger, Mulder looked up, seeing the door to the bedroom he'd shared with his sister as a boy. Suppressing an involuntary shudder, he put a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"It that where you were when the policeman found you?"

The girl shook her head. Then she answered, "Downstairs. Where the candles are."

Ah. That explained the "lights" that Owen had seen. "What's in there?"

"That's where the men from the clouds left me."

Men from the clouds. Not "cloud men." The phrase caused a shiver to wriggle up Mulder's spine. Taking his hand away from the girl's shoulder, he shifted the flashlight to that hand, and slid his right hand into his coat, feeling for his gun. Closing his hand around the

butt of the weapon, he said, "Why don't we go look at the room?"

The girl hung back, shaking her head. Reluctantly, Mulder let go of his grip on his gun, and placed his hand on her shoulder again. "You're not alone, now. We won't let anything hurt you."

"Promise?" she asked, looking up at him with wide, trusting eyes.

"Promise," he replied with a smile. "Cross my heart and hope to die," he added, crossing his heart with the hand holding the flashlight. Light danced in quick arcs across the walls and ceiling, and he chuckled softly, returning the flash to a steady level. The girl favored him with a giggle, and Karen grinned. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Mulder walked up to the door and turned the knob, his eyes closing from old practice; with a start he reminded himself that if she were truly Sammie, he needn't worry about that old ritual of closing his eyes as he went into the room, hoping she'd be there in bed when he opened them.

The door opened silently; Owen had kept the hinges well-oiled over the years. Mulder shone the flashlight into the room as the girl came up behind him, placing her hands on the door jamb and peering inside. "See? Nobody there."

She looked up at him again and smiled. He stepped into the room, followed by the girl. And just as Karen was about to follow, the door slammed shut in her face.

Fran slammed down on the accelerator and her Explorer roared out of the hospital parking lot. As she whirled the steering wheel to bring the vehicle onto the road, Scully was picking up the microphone to the radio.

"Brad Olsen, this is Dana Scully and Fran Kulik," she called out on the waveband Fran had indicated.

"Dana. This is Brad. Over."

"Brad! We've learned more about the girl — she's not Mulder's sister. She's an escapee from a maximum security institution for the criminally insane. She almost certainly has accomplices in the area. They are to be considered extremely dangerous. Over."

"What? A little girl —"

"That little girl is responsible for the deaths of at least two people, and she and her ... sister ... attempted to kill both Mulder and myself several months ago. We're responsible for their capture and incarceration. Over."

"Right. Edgartown PD are on their way. I'll relay the news. Out."

Scully replaced the microphone in its cradle and balled her hands into fists, willing the Explorer to move faster.

The dark-haired woman stepped from behind the door, the revolver in her hand trained steadily on Mulder's chest. He looked at her, and smiled faintly, nodding. He glanced back at the young girl, the girl with his sister's face, with her back pressed against the door. Outside, he could hear Karen banging on the door, calling his name.

"Let me guess. Eve 8?"

The woman smiled, a harsh, narrow-eyed smile. "That's what they called me at Litchfield. None of us had *real* names — we were just pieces of the genetic puzzle to them. A puzzle they've been trying to figure out for over thirty years. But you know all that — you talked with Eve 6."

"Your sister."

"Mmm." She motioned with the gun toward the small bed shoved against the wall. "Have a seat. The reunion's not over quite yet."

The closet opened slowly, and a young girl with shoulder-length brown hair, big eyes and protruding ears stepped out, smiling a predatory smile.

"Tina?" Mulder guessed.

"Cindy, actually," the woman known as Eve 8 said. "That's Tina there," she added, indicating the girl by the door.

"Hello, Agent Mulder," Tina said, her voice changing from the echo of Samantha to her own voice.

"Hi, Tina. So the hypnotic regression was all a fake. I take it you can't be hypnotized?"

It was Eve 8 who answered. "Really, Agent Mulder — we're far too intelligent for that."

Mulder favored her with a sour smile and turned back toward Tina. "So how did you know what my sister sounded like? There aren't any recordings of her."

Tina smiled enigmatically. Then she said chillingly, in unison with Cindy Reardon, "We just knew."

Brad Olsen's black and white spun into the Mulder driveway next to Scully's car, kicking up gravel and dust. Checking the safety on his firearm, he turned off the ignition, and picked up the microphone on his police radio. He checked in quickly with the dispatcher, informing him of his position and his intention to go into the house. Then he unclipped his safety belt, and got out of the car, crouching low and keeping Scully's car between him and the house.

In the road, he could hear another vehicle pulling to the side of the road just a few feet away from the driveway. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Fran Kulik's Explorer come to a jarring stop, and Fran and Scully got out, both dropping low to the ground to keep out of direct line of fire from the house. They hurried up to meet him.

"Anything?" Scully asked, holding her gun at the ready.

Olsen shook his head. "Just got here. No sign of anyone outside."

Scully expelled a slow breath. "Right. We're looking for two girls, both eight, the phony Samantha and her ... sister. And probably a woman in her mid-forties, 5'8", 135 pounds, dark hair. All three are unusually strong. They are extremely dangerous." She paused. "Are we going to wait for backup?"

Brad looked over his shoulder at the road. Another black and white was coming up the road, parking a little ways up from the house. "Looks like they're here. I'll brief them. Fran — go back to the car," Brad added, shaking his head with exasperation as he got up to go over to the other police officers.

Fran shook her head violently. "Sorry. I'm in this for the long haul. Besides," she added, grinning and extracting something from her medical bag, "I've got my own weapon." She held up two syringes filled with clear liquid. "Fast-acting sedative. I wield a mean needle, and you know it, Brad."

Scully had to chuckle at that. To each his or her own.

Brad wasn't gone long, and returned to the two women crouching by the car. "They'll watch the outside of the house, keep an eye on the road. We'll be going in."

"You know the layout —"

"I'll take the back. Here," he added, fishing keys out of his pocket. "I keep a set to be able to check on the place this time of year — that's the front door key," he pointed out, removing the key and handing it to Scully. "Let's go."

Karen Jenkins stood outside the closed door, pounding it with her fists. She could hear the murmur of voices — adult and child — on the other side of the door, but she couldn't make out words. Like many older houses, the Mulder house was built with solid materials. Finally, she stopped hitting the door and stood there staring at it a moment. "What am I doing?" she asked herself. She shook her head and turned to go back down the stairs, to see if the phone had been turned on yet. If not, she'd go out to the street and flag someone down. Battering her hands to pulp didn't seem to be doing any good, and she couldn't afford to damage those hands.

She was halfway down the stairs when she heard the click of a key in the front door. She glanced frantically left and right, then scurried down the last few stairs and threw herself into the living room to the right of the stairs. The door opened, and a nasty-looking gun slipped through the opening, held in the hand the other FBI agent, Scully. She slid into the house silently, followed by Fran Kulik. Karen relaxed and came out of hiding. Scully's gun whipped up, then immediately dropped when Scully recognized her. Karen hurried over to them and quickly told them what she'd seen on the second floor.

"There's definitely someone else in there with them — it sounded like a woman. I couldn't make out any words."

"Thanks, Karen," Scully told her, patting her on the arm. "Go out and get into Fran's truck, okay? Brad's coming in the back — we'll take care of this."

Brad slipped around the corner at that moment, nodding. Karen didn't waste any time getting out of the house; the number of guns was increasing, and so was her fear level.

Scully nodded at the stairs, and Brad indicated agreement. He took the lead, with Scully and Kulik edging up behind him.

"The girls prefer their own method," Eve 8 was explaining. "But I doubt very seriously we could convince you to drink a glass of foxglove, isn't that right, Agent Mulder?"

Mulder snorted agreement.

"So, I'm afraid it's the direct approach for you," she commented, raising the gun up to point directly at his heart.

"Just a minute — why?" he demanded, and the upward arc of the revolver in Eve 8's hand halted.

"Why what?"

"Why all this — the masquerade, the timing ..." he looked at the girl who looked like his sister, "the plastic surgery — everything?"

Eve 8 seemed genuinely surprised by the question. "Why, punishment, of course." At the look of uncomprehension on Mulder's face, she shook her head. "You don't understand, do you?" her voice was incredulous. "We are superior to you ... genetic accidents. The 'plastic surgery' as you call it — a genetic compound we developed as a team, moldable, pliable — and reversible. Beyond anything your best scientists have developed — or will develop for at least a generation or more. We're so far in advance of your kind. We don't belong in institutions, we can't be judged by your rules. They simply don't apply," she added with total conviction.

"So you ... declare war on us ... *genetic accidents*?" he demanded.

"Starting with you," the girl once known as Cindy Reardon said simply. "You put us away."

"And you have to be punished for that," added Tina. The sight of some ... thing ... that looked like his sister sent a jolt of pain through him.

"I think you've delayed us long enough, Agent Mulder. Your friends are making their way up the stairs — oh, yes, I can hear them through this lovely old solid door, even when you can't. Agent Scully can wait. But you ... your time has come. Now." Calmly, she pulled the trigger while the girls looked on, smiling.

The gunshot tore through the hush in the stairway, and Scully would swear later that she felt the thud of a body falling to the floor through her feet. Then a crash, the sound of glass breaking, and sudden silence.

"Shit!" Brad swore, rushing at the door and leaping into a flying kick. The door shuddered and held. "Damn. I've always wanted to do that —"

"Don't you have a key?" Fran demanded, then Scully pointed her gun and shot pointblank at the locking mechanism. With a nod to Olsen to cover her, she stood against the lefthand door jamb and turned the knob, throwing open the door. Then she pivoted rapidly into the room, holding her gun steadily out ahead of her.

A stiff breeze blew in through the remains of the window, flapping the shredded curtains. From outside, they could hear the sound of a car being started up then accelerating rapidly out onto the road, and the voices of men shouting; moments later, another car roared out onto the road.

Scully's attention was immediately riveted on the still form of Mulder lying on the floor, blood seeping freely from a wound in his left shoulder, only inches from his heart.

He opened his eyes and smiled weakly. "Don't let them get away, Scully," he whispered.

"Brad — see if you can catch them! Fran!" Olsen was already racing down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"Way ahead of you, Dana," Fran told her, dropping down to examine Mulder, her bag dropped at her side. To Mulder, she said, "Well, I always wanted to get you into bed, Mulder, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind."

Mulder chuckled softly, turning his head slightly to look at Scully. "Dance lessons came in handy ... did a little twist ..."

Scully smiled faintly. Trust Mulder to make a joke out of the move that surely had saved his life. "Hang on, Mulder. We'll get them," she told him, brushing his hair back from his forehead.

"The Eves ..."

"I know. Help's on the way."

Brad Olsen was on the radio to the Steamship Authority office in Vineyard Haven, outlining the problem. He'd received a radio call from the men he'd left on duty outside the house, and they'd called in the license number of the car, and the approximate direction they'd taken. He'd already passed the information to his peers in Edgartown and other towns on the island, sending out an all-points-bulletin. He'd also called for an ambulance for Mulder.

In the meantime, the net was closing.

Mulder's injury was not a inconsequential one, but with care, he'd recover full use of the arm. Fran patched him up as well as she could for the moment, and she and Scully helped him down the stairs to the car. The ambulance was just pulling up to the house when they came through the door. Fran got into the ambulance with Mulder, while Scully hung back reluctantly to talk with Brad.

"Steamship Authority promises they'll check all passengers. We got their license number, and I passed on their descriptions. They said there's a chopper coming across from the mainland, too."

So, Thompson was as good as his word. She hoped it would be enough.

Eve 8 pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped. Leaving the safety brake off, she told the girls to get out, and then pushed the car toward the verge. Slowly, the car slid off the roadway and into the brush. She smiled with satisfaction, then nodded to the girls. Ahead lay the Manuel Correllus State Forest. Nodding to her companions, she pushed off, accelerating rapidly to a run; the girls loped alongside her easily, and they covered ground quickly.

Before long, they arrived at a small cove along the northern coast of Martha's Vineyard. Slipping and sliding in the sand, they made their way to a tarp-covered boat. Ripping the tarp away, she revealed a small boat with an outboard motor. The girls climbed in and she shoved the boat off the sand into the water, then leapt in. Within moments, the motor was running, and they were in the Vineyard Sound headed toward Naushon Island and eventually the mainland. Happy faces turned away from the wind to smile at her.

"What do you mean, nothing?" Scully demanded.

"We found the car in the woods near the state forest. They must have gotten away on foot —"

"And how'd they get off the island?"

"This *is* an island, Agent Scully — there're a hundred places they could have hidden a boat —"

Scully threw her arms up in disgust. "Keep me informed," she added sourly and went back into Mulder's room.

Mulder looked up wanly, his face pale against the pillow. An IV drip led into his arm, and his shoulder was thickly padded with bandages. The look on Scully's face told him that the capture had failed. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Mulder, I'm sorry. They ditched the car and apparently got off the island by boat."

"It's probably how they got on the island," he agreed, opening his eyes and looking at her.

She licked her lips and frowned. "I'm going to contact the Boston and Providence Bureaus. See what they can do."

"They won't be able to do anything. We had our chance. They got away." He considered for a moment, then added, "They despise us, Scully. Not just you and me. All of us. They call us 'genetic accidents.' They've just declared war on *homo sapiens*."

"So what are they? *Homo superior*?"

He nodded. "At least they think so. She had every intention of killing me — exterminating a lesser lifeform. If I hadn't moved a little just as she pulled the trigger ..."

"Score one for accidents, Mulder," Scully pointed out. "The war's not over."

Roscoe Breskin called later in the afternoon — the same day, Mulder was shocked to realize — with news of access made to Mulder's files. Mulder listened to Breskin's report in silence, nodding.

"You want me to send a squad out there?" Breskin asked.

Mulder thought about it, and finally told Breskin, "No. I can guarantee they've moved on already."

"You okay, buddy?"

Mulder had to smile. He had two pints of someone else's blood in him, and he was hooked up to a tube. Thank God Fran hadn't insisted on catherizing him! "Yeah. I'll be fine. I'm not going to be able to get out in time to be in work tomorrow, and Scully's coordinating the mop-up here. Could you ...?"

"You got it. You know you'll never get reimbursement on this, pal. You didn't put the right paperwork through."

Chuckling, he replied, "That's okay. It started out as personal business anyway." Saying goodbye to his friend and colleague, Mulder turned off the cellular phone and laid his head back on the pillow. Started personal. Got personal. *Was* personal.

FBI HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 27, 1994

Mulder entered the squad room and stopped by Roscoe Breskin's office. His arm was in a sling, and he was still stiff, but he'd managed to convince Fran Kulik to let him return to Washington. Once there, he'd insisted on returning to work. Scully had returned the day after the Eves had escaped. Roscoe was glad to see him.

"Hey, Mulder! How you feelin'?" the tall, balding agent asked, standing up and coming around his desk. He extended his hand to Mulder, who looked at it a moment before putting down his briefcase and the shopping bag he carried, and grasping it in a handshake.

"Okay, Roscoe," Mulder told him, nodding. "I wanted to stop by and thank you for your help."

Roscoe waved the thanks away. "Hey, you'll do the same for me sometime — I'll make sure of it!" He flashed a grin, then frowned in puzzlement. "Remember what I told you about not getting reimbursed on this one? Well, I was wrong. Word came down that you and Scully are supposed to enter all your expenses for reimbursement. Seems you would have been called out on it anyway, you just jumped the gun — as usual. How do you do it, Mulder?"

"Just lucky, I guess, Roscoe," Mulder replied, equally puzzled. "You know who the order came down from?"

Breskin shook his head. "It came through Blevins' office. But where it started ..." he shook his head again. His face grew somber and he laid a hand on Mulder's good right arm. "Scully gave me some more background, Mulder. I'm really sorry it didn't turn out ... the way you wanted it to."

Mulder nodded quickly. "Yeah. It was a long shot. Sort of like a ... space shot," he added with a faint smile.

Roscoe grinned in reply. "You let me know if ... well, if I can help. And don't forget those tickets! Okay?"

"Okay."

Scully was already in the office, typing up her notes. She looked up when Mulder came in, and smiled. "I didn't think Fran would be able to keep you still for very long. How's the arm?"

"Okay." He looked at her, obviously uncomfortable. "Scully ..."

"We got orders to put our expenses in after all. Apparently Warden Thompson spoke to Blevins, and Brad put in an official request for FBI assistance," she said quickly.

"Yeah, Roscoe told me. Look —"

"Mulder. I'm sorry it wasn't Sammie. I wanted to believe it, too," she added gently.

Mulder smiled at that. "Opening yourself to extreme possibility?" he asked.

She pursed her lips, then smiled. "Wishful thinking, maybe. Are you going to be okay?"

He came over to her desk and put the shopping bag down on it. "Yeah, sure. Why shouldn't I be?"

She shook her head. "Because ... this started 22 years to the day since Sammie disappeared. Because ... well, I don't think I'd be okay. You sure you should be back at work already?"

He looked at her a long moment before replying. Then he nodded. "How else are we going to catch up with them? And besides — I love this job." His expression softened, and he added, "I need to work, Scully. Just like you did."

She considered this, remembering how she had told him the same thing following her father's death, then nodded. "What's in the bag?"

"Ah. Well," he said, reaching into the bag, "I had some visitors while I was in Fran's care. You remember Amy?"

"Ms. Chicken Pot Pie," she replied with a chuckle.

Mulder lifted out foil-wrapped parcel and put it on the table.

"Oooh, yum," Scully said, eyeing it with arched eyebrows.

"And ..." he pulled out another foil-wrapped object and placed it in front of her. "Cranberry creme pie. A New England specialty. Gift from Helen."

"Oh, that sounds great. Are we dining in today, Mulder?" she asked with a twinkle.

"Dessert, anyway."

She chuckled and turned back to her computer. "Field notes?" he asked, a slight edge to his voice.

"Field notes." She glanced at him, then back to the screen, and read off, "'Despite the deeply personal nature of the case, Agent Mulder was the first to raise suspicions about the identity of the girl'."

"You did some fine work up there, too, Scully."

"As did Roscoe, as did Marc Kammenstein at Mass General, as did Fran. As did Brad Olsen. A team effort. That's quite a group of friends you have, Mulder."

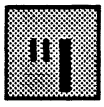
"Yeah. Sometimes it's worth going home again." He looked back at the notes displayed on the computer screen. "Which file are you going to put that in?"

Scully glanced at the screen, pursing her lips. "Both."

"Yeah. We didn't manage to close an X-File, just reopen two old ones."

"That's better than opening a new one ... isn't it?"

The expression Mulder gave Scully told her he wasn't too sure. It would take time to get over this one.



heard what happened," the older man said, seating himself next to Mulder in the bleachers around the ballfield. "This is the first opportunity I've had to get in touch."

"I know. I just got back last night. But you called while I was in New England. About them, wasn't it?" He fished a sunflower seed from his pocket, cracked the shell, and popped the seed into his mouth.

The man Mulder thought of as "Deep Throat" nodded. "Your partner learned most of it from Warden Thompson."

"But not all?"

"Not all," Deep Throat agreed. He tilted his head back, drawing a deep breath. "Apparently our friend, Eve 8, has been doing some work for one of your sister agencies. Genetic experiments. Government funded."

"And you knew about it?"

"I knew about the research, not who the scientist was. Brilliant stuff, frightening stuff. And last week, she disappeared without a trace. All the research disappeared, too. A technician, her assistant on the project, was killed. And a rather effective and far-reaching virus was placed in the mainframe. Trashed five years of work, brought the project to a complete halt, back to square one."

"Let me guess ... a genetic compound for regenerating tissue."

Deep Throat nodded thoughtfully.

"It makes it possible for them to change their appearance at will. They could be anywhere. They could be anyone."

"Yes."

Mulder tossed a sunflower shell toward the ballfield, his expression sour. "They're out there. Waiting." He stood slowly, painfully.

"Yes."

Without a word, Mulder walked away.

Leftover Souls

by Sheila Paulson

Eddie had had another one of his famous parties last night, the kind where the music is nonstop, the talk is good and the people are interesting, and drummer Jackson MacKensie had enjoyed it a lot. Eddie Plummer was one of the reigning icons of rock music, someone who combined his trendy popularity with an obsession with music and a talent to match so that he carried his near-obsessive enthusiasm for his art over to the audience, who found themselves caught up in every word that poured from the golden throat. Now that he and the group's vocalist Whitney Stone had married and bought themselves a huge ancient house that they had named Segue overlooking the Hudson River to as their retreat from the world outside, he'd felt the urge to christen it, and as Eddie's best friend and the third member of the trio, Jackson had come up to stay for the whole weekend.

It was always interesting to watch Eddie maneuver himself among the crowd. In the day and age when drugs were reputed to be in constant use by most musicians, Eddie never touched any of it and discouraged it among his guests. He didn't drink much either, but he didn't mind if his guests did, though he'd move unobtrusively among them removing the car keys from those who were too inebriated to drive home safely, offering them beds instead or finding them designated drivers. Eddie never gave the reputation as a prude either; somehow he managed to keep the depraved secret of his lack of nasty vices from the press and was content to have it so. He and Whitney, discovering their love for each other during a crisis involving a demon Eddie had accidentally freed from a statue which had threatened to devour the population of New York,[1] had been devoted to each other ever since, but never so intently that they froze out the third member of the band. Jackson was glad of that because he and Eddie went back a long way, even back to those club days in Columbus when Eddie was struggling between teaching physics at Ohio State and making music, and it had been to Jackson Eddie had come when he had made his choice.

"It has to be music," he'd insisted to an unsurprised Jackson, who would have doubted the sincerity of any other decision. "It has to be. Now if we can find a female vocalist — think of what we can accomplish."

Jackson had thought instead of Eddie's scientist father and how much he would disapprove but Eddie didn't seem daunted. He had changed his name to make it easier on the stiff-necked older man, but for years as Eddie rose to the top of the charts, the two had been estranged. Recently Eddie had tried to bridge the gap, taking Whitney home with him, and while relationships were still a little strained, Eddie's father was no longer entirely as hostile as he had been in the beginning. He may not have liked rock and roll, but he was charmed by Whitney.

The party had gone on into the wee hours of the morning and at four a.m. when Jackson made his weary way to his third floor bedroom, there were still a few die-hards in the basement recreation room, half a dozen pairs of lovebirds scattered around the ground floor salons and even a couple of curious folk exploring the upper stories. Eddie had hired himself a butler just for the kick of it, but also to keep the fans at bay — he was too soft-hearted, if truth were told, to turn them away if he answered the door himself, though he didn't like to admit it. He had bodyguards when he went out in public or on tour and they came along when Eddie stayed at Segue, but the singer liked the idea of having someone on the premises all the time. So the lugubrious Graves, who sounded vaguely — and probably deliberately — like Peter Lorre, answered the door at Segue and no one realized the stolid features concealed a martial artist and a poet with a wicked sense of humor. Graves had soon graduated to 'Tommy' among the members of the trio, and when they found he played a mean guitar, though not quite at a professional level, they let him jam with them from time to time. Tommy now had Eddie's interests at heart and was fast becoming a friend. But then Eddie was like that.

Jackson met Graves on the stairs to the third floor. "Hey, Tommy, my man," he greeted him. "Anybody lingering up there?"

"I sent a couple of young women down half an hour ago. They thought they could hide in Eddie's room, but I shooed them away. Other than that, well ..." His voice trailed off thoughtfully. "I could have sworn I heard someone in the attics — I know I heard footsteps — but when I went up there to check, there wasn't anyone around." He shook his head. "I don't think they could have got past me, but you never know.

[1] "To Soothe The Savage Ghost": *Shadowstar 34*

There might be passageways we haven't found yet. The designer of this place had a slightly twisted sense of humor if you ask me."

"What, you don't like Gothic?" Jackson demanded in mock reproach. "Tommy, you shock me."

The butler made a face that would have surprised anyone who didn't know him well. "Miss Corey heard it too," he admitted.

Nina Corey, redoubtable, defiantly middle-aged and the last thing in the world from a groupie, was Eddie's secretary. She had taken both Whitney and Jackson under her wing, treated them like mischievous but beloved children, and managed Eddie's schedule so efficiently that Malcolm Wyatt, the group's manager said she was worth her weight in platinum. If Nina Corey heard noises in the attic, there were noises in the attic, and that was that.

"I'll take a run up," Jackson promised. With all the bedrooms at Segue, he couldn't imagine any of the guests seeking out a place for nookie up there amid all the crates and trunks and paraphernalia that had come with the house and that Whitney wanted to sort through some day in hopes of finding turn of the century costumes or old love letters. Sighing, Jackson accepted his duty and turned his lagging feet toward the attic stairs.

The rest of the house was so modernized it was disconcerting to see the great vast attic lit only by one forty-watt bulb. Huge and ominous shadows swooped into corners as he stepped between them and the light, and a lurking figure proved, after a heart-stopping moment, to be a dressmaker's dummy. Some of the trunks looked even older than the turn of the century, and Jackson felt a moment's curiosity himself. There might be real treasure up here — or it might all be junk. Nobody would have left anything valuable here. Besides, the work crews had been up here, making sure the wiring and ceiling were sound. They might have found valuables and helped themselves without anyone the wiser.

"Yo, anybody up here?" called Jackson in his rich tenor voice. "Come on out before we seal you up here with the ghosties and goblins."

No answer, but all of a sudden Jackson felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. He'd been sure he was alone, and now he was equally positive he wasn't. Someone was watching. Someone was listening.

Downstairs someone put a new CD in the machine and music thumped through the very floorboards, the faint sound of lyrics drifting up past Jackson into the attic. Leftover Souls. Their greatest hit of last year. Eddie soloed on that, with Whitney doing backups and flute and Jackson on the drums. Somebody must have cranked up the bass because the song was almost a ballad, not something that should have vibrated the house like that. As he listened, the bass went away, only the distant mellowness of Eddie's pure baritone rising into the attic.

When the music had begun, the sensation of being watched had magnified, reeking with rampant hostility so strong that Jackson almost felt himself beaten down by it but once the bass stopped, the hostility eased a little. Yet it was still there. Something malevolent was lurking here.

Jackson shook his head to dispel the absurd fantasy. This was crap. Anybody who grew up tough on the streets of Chicago wasn't the type to indulge in fantasy, though it was almost fantasy that had taken his desperate craving for music out of the ghetto and into one of the top groups in the country today.

The sensation of a presence didn't go away for all Jackson's determination not to believe in it. Instead, it started to grow again as if it had realized there was someone still here.

"Go away." The words were near subliminal. "Go away."

"That's it," cried Jackson, standing his ground. "Come on out where I can see you. Party's over and it's time for you to go home."

This time the force of hatred that blasted at Jackson was so palpable he was surprised he couldn't see it. It didn't feel natural, either. Suddenly a chill encircled him as if he were standing in a blizzard with the wind whipping in from Lake Michigan full of snowflakes. "Go away!" This time, the shadows pulsed as if with life. "Go away, go away, go away." With a sinking heart he watched them fill out and take form, dark and roughly manlike, with stubs that formed into arms before his very eyes, arms that reached menacingly in his direction. Not one to be superstitious, Jackson shrank from his second encounter with a ghost. The first time, a year ago in a hotel in New York, there had been help to hand. This time, Jackson flung himself down the stairs from the attic four at a time, bellowing at the top of his lungs. "EDDIE! EDDIE! EDDIE!"

Whitney Stone had married Eddie Plummer nine months ago and had promptly discovered that marriage was a lovely institution. She kept the name Stone for professional purposes but when she signed her letters and checks, these days she signed herself Whitney Spengler and she liked that. It was still Eddie's legal last name. Though he'd adopted 'Plummer' for his appearances on the stage, he had kept his own name legally. So Whitney could go out in the world, her white-blond hair concealed by a scarf or hat, sunglasses over her eyes, and introduce herself as Mrs. Spengler, and pass unnoticed among her fans. It gave her a sense of real freedom.

Today she wanted to be unnoticed until she reached her destination, but when the cabby let her off in front of the converted firehouse and she stepped through the door, she pulled aside her disguises and hurried across the garage to the desk of Janine Melnitz, secretary for New York's first and only paranormal eliminators, the Ghostbusters. Since Eddie had recruited his cousin Egon Spengler and colleagues to assist him when he had accidentally freed a nasty spirit from a statue in which had been imprisoned for hundreds of years[1], he and Whitney had made a point of dropping in to visit the Ghostbusters whenever they were in New York and schedules permitted. This time, it was more than a friendly visit.

Janine looked up as Whitney approached and a smile lit her face. "Hi, Whitney. Good to see you. In town for Saturday's concert?"

That made Peter Venkman pop up behind the filing cabinets that separated his office from Janine's. The brown-haired psychologist came hurrying out, flung his arms around Whitney and gave her a big hug and a smack on the cheek. "Whitney, light of my life, I didn't know you were in town. I thought you were out at your great mansion on the Hudson looking down on all the poor peons. Don't you think a weekend there for the Ghostbusters would be just the thing? Servants waiting on me hand and foot —"

"How about a weekend at Segue busting a ghost?" Whitney offered, detaching herself with a smile. "I don't know if some of this Ghostbusting stuff has rubbed off on Eddie or not, but we've got an entity up there that seems pretty nasty."

"Whoa! A weekend party with a ghost thrown in." Peter's eyes lit with enthusiasm. "That sounds like fun. What do you know about it?"

"I'll call the others," said Janine, hitting the alarm bell. "Then you'll only have to tell it once." In moments, the other three Ghostbusters arrived, Ray Stantz hurrying down the stairs from the second floor with Winston Zeddemore right behind him, and Egon sliding down the firepole from the third floor where he had probably been working in his lab. All of them saw Whitney at the same moment and there were a flurry of greetings. Egon hugged her. "Is Eddie here?" he asked with interest. He and his cousin had always been fond of each other.

"He's at Malcolm's office talking about our next tour," she said. "He sent me ahead because he wanted to save some time. We're going to be tied up most of the week preparing for the Saturday concert. It's the first stop on our new tour. But Eddie didn't want to leave this until he got back. It could be serious. Hi, Ray." She eyed the youngest member of the team with a friendly smile.

Ray had almost fallen for Whitney when they first met; the two had an interest in horror films and old science fiction movies and had hit it off immediately, even though she was at that time already in love with Eddie. If that hadn't quickly become common knowledge, Ray might have fallen hard, but within a day, the two singers had become engaged. Whitney knew now how Ray had felt, though at the time she hadn't realized she might have hurt the youngest Ghostbuster by encouraging him, and was glad she hadn't.

"Hi, Whitney," he said now, smiling at her in delight. "Have you got a ghost?"

"At Segue," she confirmed with a nod. "The butler heard something in the attic and so did Miss Corey — Eddie's secretary, I don't think you've met her."

"The butler?" Peter asked in delight. "Moving in high circles these days, aren't you guys? I can't wait to get up there. I love places with butlers."

"Yeah, Pete, until they send you around to the servants' entrance," retorted Winston. "Looking good, Whitney."

She smiled at him. "You too. I don't know if this will be a bad one or not, guys, but plan to stay overnight if you'd like."

"Haunted houses," mused Peter, shaking his head. "Haunted houses are either too easy — or too hard. This could be interesting. Tell us all about it, Whitney, love."

"Well, Miss Corey and Tommy — that's the butler — heard something so Jackson went up. You know Jackson; he doesn't take crap from anybody. He thought it might be groupies hiding there — we were having a party and you never can tell who might sneak in. But when he got up there, he felt a presence and then it formed out of shadows into a roughly human shape and told him to go away."

"Did he?" asked Peter with interest, propping himself on the edge of Janine's desk and watching Whitney expectantly. Ray leaned against the desk beside him, eyes alight with interest.

"Wouldn't you?" she asked tartly. "He didn't happen to be wearing a thrower at the time."

"Good point," said Peter, winking at her. "So did Eddie take readings?" The rock singer had a doctorate in physics — his father had intended him to be a scientist — and with his cousin one of the Ghostbusters, he'd always taken an interest in the subject. Egon had given him a P.K.E. meter last time he was in town, because he'd wanted one to 'play' with and do some testing and keep his hand in.

"He took readings when we bought Segue," she explained. "There wasn't anything except faint residual readings, the kind you can pick up in any old house. You know, that might indicate a focused repeater that only manifests under certain strict conditions. We didn't think it would be a problem — and it would be kind of fun having a haunted house." That kind of apparition was more like a recording than an actual ghost that was aware and able to interact with living humans. It endlessly repeated a moment frozen in time, and paid no attention to people who happened to be passing at the moment. Many classic haunted houses had this type of ghost, and since they were almost always completely harmless, once the inhabitants knew they were there some people considered them an asset and proudly displayed their ghosts to visitors, some of whom might actually be able to see them. Busting this type of ghost was hardly worth the effort, and sometimes they could be dispelled if the reason for their presence were discovered. Egon had once explained to Eddie that they rarely got calls of this type, and when they did, the work was almost insultingly easy.

"I saw it once," she continued thoughtfully. "It wasn't in the dead of night, either. It was in the middle of the afternoon. All I got was an impression of a misty figure. It came toward me and would have walked right through me if I hadn't jumped sideways. It vanished into the tower. I figured I could live with that, but nasty things in the attic are another story."

"It doesn't sound like Jackson found a focused repeater in the attic," agreed Egon. "What did the readings say to that?"

"Class three," announced Whitney, taking out a sheaf of papers and passing them to Egon. "This is the initial reading Eddie got — he documented it right away. An hour later, it was this, and then it went down again, and when we finally got up this morning — around 11, the readings had almost faded away again and the focused repeater was all that was left."

"Wow," breathed Ray, beaming with excitement. Whitney had always enjoyed the youngest Ghostbuster's sheer delight in his work. "It either left or shifted dimensions or went quiescent. It sounds pretty powerful for a class three. I can't wait to see it."

"Yeah, Ray, powerful," said Peter with a notable lack of enthusiasm. "That should be *great* fun. I don't *like* nasty ones."

"It needn't be difficult, Peter," argued Egon. "However, a class 3 could mean something tragic happened in the house. We'll need to take all our equipment for testing as well as our packs. What about the focused repeater, Whitney? Did anyone else ever see it?"

"A guest said she saw a figure in white drifting through the hall one night, but she was prone to overreacting — and probably high on something — so we never were quite sure whether to believe her or not. It wasn't in the same place where I saw it."

"Still, it's possible," said Egon. "Hmm. Interesting. I wonder if there are any links between the two spirits. The focused repeater is evidently still bound to the house, but perhaps the other isn't."

"Wow," cried Ray. "Maybe the nasty one is there to protect the other one."

"Or to hurt it," Peter said quickly. "You never know. Those nasty ones take it out on whoever is handy. I'd just as soon keep myself intact — I wouldn't want to deprive my fans of my shining presence."

"You're theorizing in advance of data," Egon said dampingly. "Not to mention being nauseatingly conceited."

"Yeah, but we're used to that." Winston grinned. "So what do you say, guys? We haul ass up to Segue and bust the ghosts."

"At least the attic one," Whitney said quickly. "So far it hasn't come downstairs."

"Any idea what made it manifest this time?" asked Egon with interest. He always tried to find patterns and used logic to solve the problems. Ray jumped about with intuitive lunges and plunged headlong into any problem. Winston was the common sense member of the team, the singer thought. And then there was Peter. To all intents and purposes, he liked to lounge around half asleep, making smart remarks, but he didn't do it in the heart of a crisis, and she suspected he was a very good psychologist. They were a strange team, bound together with ties of friendship and experience, and if anyone could deal with the thing in the attic, it was these four men.

"I don't know," she replied. "We were having a party."

"Aw, and you didn't invite us," mourned Peter. He leaned against Ray, one arm braced comfortably on the occultist's shoulder and eyed Whitney expectantly.

"We'd rather have you to ourselves," said Whitney with a grin. "You do tend to be the center of attention wherever you go."

Peter preened himself at the thought, and Ray elbowed him teasingly in the side.

"So the party made the ghost manifest?" Egon prompted.

"I don't know. It was four a.m. It might be the time, or the music. We don't know. I don't remember being up at 4 a.m. at Segue before. Of course we haven't been in the house that long. It could come out and dance around the attic every night."

"Now there's an appealing thought," Peter said. "We'll camp in the attic all night and wait for it. Lots of munchies and a tape player and a deck of cards. Sounds like an all-nighter."

"We can go out there now," Egon volunteered. "I don't remember any scheduled appointments this afternoon. Janine?"

"No, you're free until late tomorrow afternoon at the Port Authority," the secretary confirmed. "It doesn't sound like a very friendly ghost. Be careful, Egon."

"*We* will," said Peter quickly, winking at Whitney. "Nice to be loved, Janine."

She made a face at him. "Let me know how it works out," she said.

Segue stood on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, a huge red brick mid-Victorian edifice with a square tower five stories high rising over the front door with a balcony at the level of the second floor. The third floor of the tower had simple round windows, but the fourth had a walkway around it and three long narrow windows on each of the four sides, the whole tower rising up above the level of the house itself, which was tall to begin with because each floor had obviously high ceilings, especially the first floor. The gingerbread trim was painted in sparkling white, restored to its former glory by the team Eddie had hired to recreate the original look of the house. It was an imposing mass, three stories high with possible attics above the top floor, and even in the dimming light of twilight, it looked impressive to Peter.

"Wow! I think we're in the wrong job, guys," he blurted out, eyeing the evidence of obvious wealth with a trace of envy. "Maybe I should practice up on my music."

"Uh, no," Ray began hastily while Winston shook his head.

"Not a good idea, man."

Egon smiled. "No amount of practice would turn you into an Eddie, Peter, and I fear the rest of us need you on the job."

"It was just an idea," returned Peter, grimacing at them wryly. "You guys never appreciated my music anyway. Not everybody has good taste. But look at that place. Butler and everything. I like this. I think we should stay a week."

"We *are* staying overnight, Peter," Ray reminded him. "Because it's probably too late now to see that focused repeater unless the nasty in the attic disturbs it. Wow! This is really going to be great! I love haunted houses."

"You would," responded Winston with a tolerant smile. "At least it's no Heck House."

"Just as well. I didn't *like* Heck House," replied Peter as Winston pulled Ecto up before the front door. "Did

us out of our millions bucks each. I like this place, though. The lap of luxury and all we have to do is mop up one baddie in the attic. No biggie, and we'll get to mingle with the rich and famous ..."

"I remind you, Peter, of Mrs. Faversham's attic," said Egon as he climbed out of the car. "That was all we thought we had to do there."

"Egon, that's not fair. I'm going to enjoy this bust and nothing you can say will change my mind. I was born for this kind of life." He bounded up to the front door and raised his hand to knock.

The door swung open silently before he could touch it and an imposing figure in black intoned, "Good eee-vening," with more than a dash of Peter Lorre in his voice. Peter jumped.

"We're the Ghostbusters," said Egon practically to the butler as he joined them on the step, concealing a smile even though Peter saw traces of amusement in his eyes at Peter's startled reaction. "Whitney sent us ahead. She and Eddie won't be returning until later this evening."

"Of course, Dr. Spengler." He unbent abruptly. "You and Eddie could almost be twins, you know, except for the hair." His eyes lingered momentarily on Egon's elaborate 'do' and he shook his head with such a tiny gesture it might almost have been missed. "My name is Graves. Shall I help you carry in your proton packs and other equipment, or is it too delicate for the layman to handle?"

Peter grinned. "Oh, no, you can handle it," he said. "Well, maybe not Egon's. He hates it if *anybody* touches his special equipment. Weeeellll, maybe not Janine."

Egon's irritated, "Peter!" floated back to him as he started around to the back of Ecto.

He ignored it, grinning. "But you can carry *my* pack if you want to."

The butler met Peter's stare for a moment, then his eyes began to sparkle. "Very well, sir," he intoned in formal accents. "As you wish."

Somehow, in the course of the unloading, while Graves assumed the burden of Peter's pack, Venkman found himself loaded down with P.K.E. meters, ghost traps, and various other detection devices until his arms were full. Bearing Peter's pack before him like a trophy, the butler led the way into the house while the others followed, carrying their overnight bags, their packs slung over their shoulders.

"Somehow I don't think I won that one," Peter mumbled to Ray out of the corner of his mouth.

"Have you seen the ghost?" Ray asked the butler eagerly, snatching one of the P.K.E. meters off the pile Peter was carrying and turning it on. It didn't react.

"I heard ... sounds in the attic." Graves replied in the tones of one who intends to create an atmosphere, or milk a situation for all it was worth. "However, when I investigated, I saw nothing. It was Jackson who saw the entity. But several of us heard the sounds, including Miss Corey."

"Who's Miss Corey?" Peter asked breathlessly, brightening at the mention of an unattached female. The equipment was starting to get really heavy. Ray didn't help matters by tapping at the P.K.E. meter's screen and then shutting it off and returning it to the pile Peter carried. All three of the others put down their bags as soon as they got inside.

"Eddie's secretary. She will be with you presently. If you would like to set up any equipment necessary, you can use this room." Graves led them into a small formal parlor where several card tables had been set up to hold their gear. Peter headed for the nearest one and deposited his load on it, trying not to look like he was catching his breath. When he turned, his pack was on the other table and Graves had vanished.

Humming the Twilight Zone theme, Peter made ghostly gestures with his fingers. "I think we ought to take readings of *him*," he offered with a grin. "He's the spookiest thing I've seen yet."

"I thought he was great," Ray defended the absent butler enthusiastically. "Eddie must have told him all about us."

"I *did* take a reading," Egon replied, holding up his P.K.E. meter, which had somehow managed not to be in Peter's load. "And I have to report he's completely normal."

"By that, I take it you mean he's not a ghost, Egon," Peter said with a bright grin. "Not that he's quote, normal, unquote. I mean, I ask you —"

"Miss Corey," announced the butler's voice from the doorway. He vanished again but not before Peter had

seen amusement once again touch the solemn face and transform it.

The woman who walked into the room was not Peter's idea of a dream date, though she was attractive in a defiant kind of way. Her hair was greying heavily and pinned in an uncompromising bun at the nape of her neck. She didn't seem to be wearing any makeup, and there were age lines at the corners of her eyes, but she had elegant facial bones, the kind that would keep her beautiful all her life. She was wearing, unexpectedly, jeans and a casual sweater rather than the business suit Peter would have expected to match her hair. Her whole demeanor said, 'this is me, this is the way I am, without artifice, take me or leave me.' On the whole Peter cautiously approved. The caution was because she had the look of someone who didn't take crap from people, and Peter was good at dishing out crap in tricky new situations.

Her eyes moved from one to another of the Ghostbusters, falling last upon Peter. For a moment, they locked eyes, testing each other, then she turned away to glance at the equipment, and Peter had a sense of a postponement, a time out in the hostilities. "I'm Nina Corey," she introduced herself. "Welcome to Segue." Her eyes lingered on Egon a moment. "You do resemble Eddie rather strongly, though it's hard to imagine him with his hair like that."

"Or Egon with a punk look," Peter put in irrepressibly. "Hey, Spengs, maybe you ought to try it."

Egon didn't dignify that suggestion with an answer, fiddling with his P.K.E. meter instead of replying.

The corners of Miss Corey's mouth twitched momentarily as she considered this image, then she resumed her dignity. "Eddie phoned you were coming, gentlemen. He wanted me to show you the site of the fixed repeater and then take you to the attic. If you will gear up and bring whatever you think we'll need, you can examine both sites immediately. If the attic entity doesn't manifest, we'll have dinner prepared for you when you come down and you can go up again later. It was in the wee hours we started experiencing sounds and other activity. A classic haunting, I suspect."

"Complete with apparition," agreed Ray as he slid his arms into the straps of his proton pack. "You heard it, didn't you? What did it sound like?"

"Footsteps, mostly, and a kind of rattling around as if someone were going through the trunks up there, looking for something. I didn't think ghosts, of course. I assumed we had snoopy groupies. Tommy and the bouncers had to put a number of the local teenagers out earlier in the evening and there was always the possibility they had missed one or two."

"So you sent Graves up to look?" asked Winston, snapping the buckle of his pack into place and wiggling his shoulders to settle it as comfortably as possible.

"He heard it, too," she replied as the four men gathered the equipment they would need. "Tommy may not look it, but he has a sense of humor. I thought at first he was joking, but then I heard it. Most of the bedrooms are on the third floor. Eddie doesn't have servants, per se. I mean cleaning people and maids and the like. There's a cook, but she lives in the village and goes home at night, and three girls come in to clean several days a week, and we hire caterers for parties. The bedrooms are mostly on the third floor. There's the suite Eddie and Whitney have, at the back of the house overlooking the river. There are guest rooms, one of which is permanently assigned to Jackson when he comes. Tommy and I have our rooms near the front, and there's one for Malcolm when he comes, and a room Eddie set aside for his father, should he ever choose to visit. The rest of the rooms are unoccupied, though we flushed a few couples out of them last night when the party was winding down. Some of the party guests stayed overnight but they all left this morning. So right now the only ones here are you four, the cook and Tommy and I. Eddie and Whitney will be back later this evening — Jackson's staying here, or in the city, depending on his current girlfriend's job and whether he can spend time with her in the evenings, until after the gig on Saturday night."

"That gives us a clear picture, thank you," Egon told her as he settled his proton pack on his shoulders and snapped the buckle into place. "Will you take us to the first site now?"

Miss Corey led the way out into the entry hall again where an elegant staircase rose to the left of the front door and another, longer hall went past it on the right toward the back of the house. A magnificent parlor with red velvet wallpaper above dark paneling opened off that hallway. The butler emerged from that room as the Ghostbusters started up the stairs and looked up at them as they climbed.

The second floor hallway was well lit, and one open door revealed what must have been designated as a

practice and rehearsal room. Peter got a glimpse of a huge grand piano, and a rack that held several guitars. Opposite the piano were drums, and he could see several speakers and a keyboard as he poked his head in.

"The band practices there," Nina Corey explained. "It's soundproofed. Come this way. The repeater appears in this corridor."

It looked like a perfectly ordinary hallway, running nearly the length of the second floor, from the top of the stairs at the back toward the tower in front. Fading western light shone through a window at the end of the hall.

"That's the tower," the secretary said, gesturing. "Eddie was disappointed it didn't face the river because he thought the view would have been spectacular. We're high over the water here. But there's a Captain's walk on the roof and the door to it opens from the top of the tower, through an attic door. Eddie likes to go up there and write music."

"So where does the ghost show up?" Peter asked, glancing around the hall while Egon and Ray took careful readings.

"Right here." She pointed to the hallway. "It moves quickly down this hall, heading for the tower balcony. It's impossible to make out features, but everyone who has seen it insists it is a female form."

Ray's eyes were wide and eager as he stared down the hall, but Egon's P.K.E. meter was already operating, his glasses slipping down his nose as he bent over the instrument. Glancing over his shoulder, Winston checked the hall in both directions while Peter looked at question at Nina Corey.

"Have *you* seen it?" he asked. The woman didn't look as if she would ever see anything remotely paranormal.

She surprised him. "Once. It wasn't this late in the day, though. It was the middle of the afternoon. You should have come earlier."

"We didn't *know* earlier," Ray defended them. "I don't see anything now. What have you got, Egon?"

"Merely residuals," the physicist replied. "Faint and consistent with a focused repeater. This is not a complete manifestation," he explained to Miss Corey. "It's simply an echo, a recording made upon the fabric of the house. We can trap it when it appears, of course — this kind of capture usually requires no more than a trap alone. Many people prefer to leave this kind of spirit, as it is harmless."

"Yeah, and it adds all kinds of atmosphere to a house," Peter replied with a grin. "There's usually not enough of an entity left for me to talk to it and make it go away. It's not a full personality."

"Doesn't it mean something tragic happened here, though?" asked Miss Corey, "something so powerful and terrible it imprinted itself upon the house?"

"Perhaps," Egon replied. "Sometimes it's a violent death or another tragedy. Knowing the history of the house would help. Did anyone die violently here?"

"We don't know the history of the house, at least not in enough detail to explain who she might be," the secretary replied. "Eddie was interested, but we couldn't learn much. The house was built in 1860 by Rudolph Henderson and his family lived here until 1897. After that, the house was unoccupied for twenty-one years before it was bought by a Colonel Murchie. He lost his fortune in the crash of '29 and had to give up the house. The house was broken up into apartments in the late '30s and it stayed that way until sometime in the '70s, when it was bought by a Philip Henderson who insisted he was a descendant of the original owners. He had the house restored from the apartments it had once been to a one-family residence and came here on occasional weekends until his death two years ago. He had no family and left the house to his business partner who didn't want it and put it on the market. Eddie bought it last year. He wanted us to do some research on the place, but there hasn't been much time. Why? Do you think there was a tragic death here?"

"It could be," Ray said earnestly. "It's usually really strong emotion that creates this kind of focused repeater. If we knew what it was, we might be able to do something about it, even now, if you didn't want us to trap her."

"We better find out what's in the attic first, though," Winston said practically, lifting his eyes toward the ceiling. "This one doesn't sound dangerous, but that attic ghost sounds like a bad one."

"Then I will show you the attic, and while you investigate it, I'll find the papers we've gathered about the house."

"Not coming up with us?" asked Peter with a quick grin.

"I think not. I've noticed workers should have privacy in the course of their jobs." Her eyes twinkled suddenly. "Of course the fact that I don't care for the sound of the ghost has a considerable amount to do with it. I'm paid to be a secretary, not a Ghostbuster. This way, please." Calmly she led them to the stairs to the third floor.

"The attic." Miss Corey opened the door upon a smaller and narrower flight of stairs that rose into blackness. Reaching out she flipped a switch and light shone out, far dimmer than Peter liked.

"Gee, Eddie's got the bucks. You'd think he could spring for better than forty-watt bulbs," he said wryly.

"I'm certain he will — when we get around to the attic," Miss Corey said primly. "You'll have to forgive him for failing to anticipate a ghost up there while doing renovations." She smiled. "Enjoy yourselves. From what I've seen of you on television, I'm sure you'll have fun running around and blasting holes in the roof." While they were staring, she turned and hurried down the hall toward the stairway to the lower floors.

"Now there's a lady I wouldn't want to cross," muttered Winston. He glanced up the stairs. "Oh well, cheer up, guys. We've got flashlights. Come on. This sounds interesting."

The attic stairs creaked as the four men climbed to the attic, an ominous sound full of eerie atmosphere. Outside, the wind howled around the house with sudden force and a shutter rattled.

"Then, the rains came," intoned Peter ominously.

"Just so it isn't the monster coming," replied Winston, shaking his head. He took his proton rifle in hand and looked around for trouble.

The attic stretched before them; large, high-ceilinged and full of junk in the form of old trunks, coat racks, a dressmaker's dummy, pieces of battered and abandoned furniture, a hanging rod full of clothes, modern suitcases which might be Eddie's or even Philip Henderson's, an old globe of the world, and other objects that cast eerie shadows into the dark corners of the room.

"It's a garage sale waiting to happen," said Winston, shaking his head. "Wow, there's a big stack of books over there. I bet some of them are valuable."

"If so, they are improperly stored," Egon replied. "Probably worm-eaten and moldy. If any of them are valuable, stacking them up here is criminal." He started for the books, though not so intrigued his P.K.E. meter wasn't activated, the antennae stirring lightly and the lights blinking though faintly enough to indicate no current ectoplasmic presence.

"Wow, look at all this great stuff," enthused Ray. "It would be fun to come back here when we've caught the ghost and help Eddie and Whitney sort through it. Maybe there are diaries and things to tell us what might have happened through the years."

"When this house has been rented as apartments?" Winston asked with a shake of his head, bending over the books in obvious disappointment. Most of them were cheap, modern paperbacks, and the hardcover ones looked like a collection of Harold Robbins and Jacqueline Susann. "Anything good would be long gone."

"Maybe the attic was locked then."

"Never stopped most folks," Winston replied with a shake of the head. Gripping his thrower carefully in both hands, he reached out to the nearest trunk and lifted it with the tip of the weapon. A smell of mothballs wafted into the air as a pile of yellowed sheets was revealed. "See? Real valuable," Winston remarked in mild disappointment.

"Aw, that's be good stuff here somewhere. I'm gonna take a look ..."

"I wouldn't, Ray," warned Egon just as the P.K.E. meter started beeping more strongly, the antennae shooting up to a near-erect position with blinking lights. "I think we'll have something more urgent to deal with first."

"Yeah, I can go along with that," Peter said as the hair lifted on the back of his neck. Suddenly the whole atmosphere of the attic had changed from a place full of odds and ends to a huge dark chamber nearly aching with menace. The shadows billowed and grew like churning clouds in a stormy sky, and the sense of presence expanded so strongly Peter was sure someone was glaring at him out of the darkness. He half expected to see glowing red eyes. "I don't like this," he muttered.

"I can't see it!" Ray revolved slowly, thrower leveled in his hands, his gaze seeking out the deeper shadows. "There's something coming, but I can't see it."

"Maybe you can't see it, homeboy, but it's here," Winston replied. He, too, had a tight-knuckled grip on his proton gun as he darted uneasy looks here and there, prepared to fire in an instant, the moment a target manifested. "Come on, Egon, just point it out."

"This isn't a simple manifestation, guys," Egon replied, his brow wrinkled with concentration as he looked from the screen of his P.K.E. meter to the darker corners of the attic and back again. "I can't pin down one specific entity. It's as if the entire attic were permeated with hatred, a general overlay of unfriendly PK energy that has been building for decades, perhaps a century."

"I'll buy the unfriendly part," Peter said ruefully, darting uneasy glaces over his shoulder. "Even when I was soaping windows on Halloween when I was a kid, nobody was ever this mad at me."

"Go away!" the voice started out as breathy, nearly subliminal, something they had to strain for, but it built rapidly, the way the noise of a jet plane will begin as a muted hum and suddenly graduate to a thunder as if the plane means to land on the roof. This time the roar of hatred gained strength swiftly, full of malevolence and loathing that built to a sense of such violent negative feelings Peter nearly felt battered by it. He could tell by the looks on his buddies' faces they felt the same.

"GO AWAY!" the entity moaned. "*GO AWAYYYY!*"

"Perhaps it might be expedient to stage a retreat to the staircase," Egon murmured, grabbing Ray's arm and pulling him in that direction, though the occultist was so fascinated he looked like he wanted to resist.

"What happens if we just start blasting?" Winston asked practically. He didn't appear to enjoy the attic's fury any more than Peter did, but he wasn't the sort to give ground simply because a threat has been made.

"There's no specific target, Winston," Ray replied, though he, too, hung back against Egon's pull. "It's as if the entire attic is full of dispersed energy. We might try a few quick bursts but there's nothing to latch onto unless it chooses to manifest fully. I think we'll just make it mad."

"And we really don't want to do that, do we, fellas?" asked Peter. "Or we could wait until we're on the stairs to make it mad — that way we can leave quickly. I think that's a *brilliant* plan."

"A few quick bursts would give us an interesting study." Egon was still moving toward the staircase, towing a stubborn Ray behind him, and Peter took a couple of quick steps in that direction as Winston joined the other two. The menace emanating from the attic suddenly made departure seem like a great idea.

"GO AWAY!" moaned the threatening voice. "Go away — *or else*!"

"I hate 'or else'," Peter cracked, but the last word sputtered away to abrupt and startled silence when a trunk that had been sitting between him and the doorway suddenly flew up at him in an eruption of dust and cobwebs. It would have taken his head off if he hadn't let out a dismayed, "Yaaaa!" and flung himself sideways in an attempt to set a new land speed record. The bulky trunk gave him a hard, if glancing, whack on the shoulder as it passed and that arm promptly went numb. His fingers opened and the thrower clattered away as he grabbed for the injured area with his other hand. He staggered for a moment before he regained his balance. "Ow! That *hurts*. I was going. There's no need to be hasty here."

"PETER!" cried Ray and Egon in chorus, starting toward him in alarm. Winston came too, holding up his thrower as if to fire at any more recalcitrant luggage that might decide to become airborne.

He waved them back with his good hand. Already sensation was returning to his arm in the form of pins and needles, and a deep ache was beginning where he'd been struck. Very carefully he wiggled his fingers and they moved without major pain. Probably nothing broken then — but he'd bet the bruise would be world class.

"I'm okay, guys," he reassured them hastily as he scooped up his thrower and hurried toward them. "Just bunged up. Get out of here before it throws anything else. We've gotta figure this out."

He called over his shoulder, "I'm going, I'm going. Unless you want us all to stay, can it with the redecorating, Jack."

Whether the malevolent spirit understood him or not, nothing else jumped at him. Waved back by Peter — "Let's not encourage him to use Dr. Venkman as a

target," — the other three stopped advancing, struggling against their instinct to come running to help him, probably realizing, as Peter had, that movement *into* the attic would trigger a second attack. Hands reached out to grab him as he wobbled his way between stacked junk and treasure, pulling him onto the stairs.

"Yee-ouch! Not that arm, Ray! Have a little sense, willya."

"Sorry, Peter." Guiltily Ray shifted his grip, and the three of them half carried the injured psychologist down the stairs, spilled forward into the hall and slammed the door behind them, leaning against it in relief.

There was a long moment of silence, then Peter freed himself, straightened up, and touched his aching shoulder with wary fingers. The pain was starting to fade but it hadn't faded enough for the gesture to be comfortable. He eased up on the pressure, gnawing on his bottom lip to hold back a gasp. "Now it's personal!" he cried hotly. "I'm gonna get Mr. Trunk Tosser or know the reason why."

"We need a great deal more information," Egon agreed reasonably, his eyes lingering a moment on the screen of his P.K.E. meter. He looked up abruptly and focused his eyes on the brown haired man. "Before we do that, let us take a look at your shoulder, Peter. Is it broken?"

A sudden dark shape materialized at their side, causing Winston to blurt out a startled, "AHHH!" only to relax as he realized it was only Graves.

"I heard shouting," the butler told Egon. "I do hope no one was endangered." His eyes lingered on Peter who was gently massaging the aching area as if he could get it to go away.

"Peter hurt his shoulder," Ray explained in a worried voice. "That thing threw a suitcase at him!"

"Wrong, Ray," corrected Peter, shaking his head. "A suitcase is something you take with you on a plane. That thing was big enough to hide a body in. It's a wonder I don't have a whole slew of broken bones. I wouldn't say no to a nice big ice pack, Graves." He saw a ladderback chair just along the passage and sat down in it, leaning his head back against the wall and closing his eyes. The worst of the pain was receding, but it still ached.

"And perhaps some aspirin." Graves hovered over them as the guys removed the psychologist's proton pack, unzipped his jumpsuit far enough for them to work his left arm out of the sleeve without undue exertion, then pulled his tee shirt away from the affected area. Already reddened and puffy, it looked like it would darken up into a huge bruise almost immediately. Peter craned his neck to study it, his mouth twisting at the sight.

"Definitely aspirin," the butler said practically. "And ice. I don't think Eddie realized it would throw things. This is unfortunate."

"Unfortunate," echoed Peter in disbelief. "Betcha he practices understatement in his spare time," he muttered to the guys.

"Yeah, we don't need a Ghostbuster, we need a Kung Fu expert," replied Winston. "Or at least some kind of padding."

"I'll buy that," said Peter with a grin. "Ow!" This as Ray prodded the reddened area with cautious fingers. "That's right, Ray, leave your mark. Hey!" he added quickly when Ray pulled his hand back, an abashed look on his face. "This is great! Now I won't have to wash Ecto for that car show on Saturday."

"Wanna bet?" asked Winston as Graves started away to fetch the ice.

Peter moved his arm cautiously. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he'd thought at first, even though it would probably be stiff in the morning. He looked up and saw Egon watching him.

"It will be painful for you to wear a pack, Peter," the physicist said.

"Nice alliteration, Spengs. Yeah, but there's something nasty up there. You're gonna need me. Besides," he reminded the blond, gesturing at his bruise, "this isn't where the strap of my pack hits. You figured out yet how we're going to stop it? Tell me you've figured it out, you boy genius you."

"Obviously it will be necessary to force it to materialize," Egon replied thoughtfully. "We need to know what it is, of course, before we can do that."

"So what do we do, stand in the doorway and introduce ourselves? Not a great idea. It's got a lot more steamer trunks up there."

"You were hardly hit by a steamer trunk, Peter," Egon said dampingly. "If so, you'd probably have sustained fractures instead of a mere bruise."

"If this was *your* bruise you wouldn't use words like 'mere' to describe it." Cautiously Peter rotated his arm and wiggled his fingers. It hurt but it was bearable, and the strap of his pack wouldn't press directly against it. He could still fight if he had to. "But you're right, I can handle it, as long as I can kick back and put my feet up for a few days when this is all over. So what did you find out up there?"

Egon adjusted his glasses on his nose. "The energy was high, Peter, but high for its class. It's a class three."

"From the way it was heaving luggage around, I thought it would be a class seven," Peter replied in disappointment. "You sure, Spengs? Maybe it's a demon that can mask its power."

"A demon wouldn't need threats or throw furniture, Peter," said Ray quickly. "It would just try to trash us."

"The one in Mrs. Faversham's attic threw furniture," Peter remembered. "It even *was* furniture some of the time. And what do you call this —" he gestured at his bruise — "if not trying to trash us. Where's the difference?"

"It is genuinely weaker than a demon, Peter," Egon explained. "Part of what we experienced up there is simple rage, a sense of anger, an overlay of emotion. A class three was human once, remember? We might be able to find out why it's trapped in the attic."

"Like the demon in Mrs. Faversham's place?" asked Ray with interest. "It still sounds the same to me. It was trapped up there, too."

"No. That was a demon her father had summoned, and it was confined in the attic so long it grew mad," Egon replied. "This is different. Events hold this ghost in the attic, something so terrible it created strong emotion which lingers in the attic like another recording, of the type we see in the hallway, though of course this one is aware of us. I'm not sure this one couldn't leave the attic if it chose, but I don't think it has for so long it's almost trapped here."

"Just because it's stayed so long?" asked Ray. "You mean the overlay is like another fixed repeater?" His eyes widened in fascination. "Separate from the thing Jackson saw last night — I mean this morning — only a whole lot stronger?"

"Separate, perhaps," Egon replied thoughtfully. "But connected. The entity that told us to go away was distinct from the anger yet a part of it. Whether the overlay is a result of years of anger or a projection of the ghost itself isn't clear yet. I'll need to take more readings before I can formulate a proper theory."

"You could always formulate an *im*proper theory in the meantime. Let me get this clear, Egon," said Peter thoughtfully, working his arm into the sleeve of his black tee shirt as carefully as he could. "That thing up there is pissed off about something and it's so mad it's nearly created a second ghost just to match the mood?"

"Possibly, Peter. In a sense it's another focused repeater, but it's a much more complete entity. It is aware of visitors to the attic, whereas the female form in the corridor seems to have no awareness, merely a memory trapped in time."

"Something happened here," Ray theorized, fascinated, "something really bad, in order to cause it. I wonder if it was the same something or two different ones."

"Hey, I'm betting it was the same one," Peter replied. "We've *got* to bring these two together."

"That might be an extraordinarily risky idea, Peter," said Egon. He aimed his P.K.E. meter at the attic door and studied it. Even through the closed door, he picked up a reading, but as they watched it seemed to lose strength and fade away to nearly nothing.

"Residuals," said the blond. "It's retreating, now that we've gone. Yet Eddie took readings of the whole house and didn't provoke the entity. Workmen spent time up there with impunity. I wonder what awakened it this time?"

"It was missing a happening party," suggested Peter with a twinkle. "I know if I was stuck up in a musty old attic and there was a party down below full of famous people I'd sure be teed off that I didn't get an invite."

Egon's eyes grew thoughtful. "You may have something there, Peter."

"Really, Egon?" asked Ray, eyes widening. He checked his own P.K.E. meter. "It's fading now, nearly gone. But I bet it would wake up again if we went back up there. It was pretty quiet until we got up there, but it

triggered the meters right away. It didn't do that for Eddie when he was checking the house or he would have called us in then."

"I still think it was the party," persisted the psychologist. He started to work his arm into the sleeve of his jumpsuit, and Egon tucked his meter into his belt to help him. "Lots of noise, strange people wandering around, messing with the house. Some of them may have gone into the attic. Anyway, there was probably music and lots of talk and some rock music will shake the whole building. It's probably a critic or something. Or only likes classical music."

Brisk footsteps approaching made them all look up. Miss Corey was hurrying toward them, holding an ice bag in her hands, with the butler just behind her. He had a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin on a tray and he was balancing it with the ease of a waiter making his way through a busy restaurant. Peter had the sudden realization he did it on purpose as if to caricature himself, and he began to suspect the man was much more than he'd appeared.

"Your aspirin, sir," he intoned now in his Peter Lorre voice. He tended to forget that most of the time, but it crept out occasionally. Probably deliberate.

"Be quiet, Tommy," Miss Corey told him automatically, her tone suggesting she often spoke to him that way. "Eddie would have your hide for it, and you know it."

At once the butler unbent. "I have to keep in practice," he said. "Not everybody's like Eddie, after all."

Miss Corey's eyes warmed maternally. "No, very few are, actually. Here, Peter. This should help." She held out the ice bag. Ray snatched it from her hands and bent to apply it to Peter's shoulder.

"There. How does that feel, Peter?" he asked solicitously. He never let Peter shirk for pretend illnesses, but when Peter was really sick or hurt, Ray was good about trying to help.

"I think I'm gonna live," admitted Peter, wiggling slightly to adjust the ice bag just right. It did feel good. Egon opened the aspirin bottle and shook two tablets out into Peter's palm, then passed him the glass of water. "Drink it, Peter. We have a great deal of work to do tonight."

"Maybe I should come and work for Eddie instead," Peter said to Graves with a grin. "He only has to deal with hordes of screaming fans — and I think I could get to like that." He didn't mean it, of course. He wouldn't trade his buddies and Ghostbusting for all the rock stars in the known universe and from the disgusted grimaces they were throwing him they were completely aware of it.

"What sort of work?" asked Miss Corey, turning to Egon with interest. "And can any of it be done over dinner? I'd like to send Cook home soon. She knows you're here and she's uneasy over the thought of encountering a ghost."

"Sounds good to me," Winston replied with a grin. "We can try to figure it out while we eat. We're gonna need to know more about this house before we try to bust either ghost."

The meal was a good one, roast beef and baked potatoes with a crisp salad and a green bean casserole. Peter was delighted, and even his sore shoulder didn't prevent him from digging in with great enthusiasm. Miss Corey ate with them. Graves had vanished as soon as they came downstairs.

"He likes his jokes," she said when the butler left. "When he first applied he was stiff as can be, but it didn't take long for Eddie to get to him. Eddie gets to most people."

Like he got to you, thought Peter, eyeing her curiously. Her starched and polished exterior didn't match the warmth in her eyes when she spoke of the singer, yet it didn't feel like a crush. Nina Corey wasn't old enough to be Eddie's mother, but she had no children of her own. Peter was willing to bet good money she'd adopted the band in her heart and considered them family now. Maybe it was some Spengler characteristic. After all, Egon had gotten to *him* back in college when Peter had been prepared to lower his guard to no one and now the blond physicist and the other two Ghostbusters had become *his* family.

"I like him," said Ray quickly. "He's doing it all for fun. But I think he hates the ghost — because it might be dangerous to the people here. And it *is* dangerous. Peter found out about that. What we need to know is whether there were any unexplained deaths or tragedies here at the house. Usually when we find something like this, it's because the ghost left something undone. The woman in the hall is not really a complete ghost. She's more like an echo. The louder the noise, the longer the echo lasts, and it's like that. The worse the tragedy, the stronger and longer are the afterimages."

"I don't remember ever hearing anything like that," Miss Corey replied, pursing her lips in thought. She sat there, fork raised, eyes clouding with concentration. "There were some papers, but not many, unless there's something in the attic. But I think all that went up there later, gathered from various places in the rest of the house. Philip Henderson had family papers, I think, but I would doubt he kept them here. Unless we get lucky and find a diary hidden in a secret panel..." Her face wrinkled in scorn at the thought.

"Wow! A secret panel!" Ray's eyes glowed in eagerness as if he meant to jump up and start tapping on the walls to listen for hollow sounds. "I bet places like this had them, don't you think, Egon? Aunt Lois's house has five that we know of, one of them a secret room. There are certain places where we're more likely to find them — and of course they'd need to be in the original woodwork or wall structures. Sometimes there'd be passages down inside wardrobes or window niches, and secret rooms are often beside fireplaces when there's a stairs going up. But those are only the obvious ones."

"Searching for secret panels would no doubt be amusing," said Egon in a damping tone, "but the odds of finding a secret diary relating to the incident in question are highly unlikely. A much better possibility is the local newspaper. It's late so there might not be anyone available to assist us, but we can telephone after dinner. Otherwise we can do it in the morning."

Winston nodded, waving his fork in agreement. "Got it. I can run in and check it out. You think there was a murder or suicide here?"

"Something like that would create an aura in the structure of the house," Egon replied. "We've encountered that kind of thing before. Violent death can create a ghost."

"But we've got two ghosts," argued Peter. "What is it, a murder/suicide? Nasty stuff." He took a bite of his beef — it was so tender it nearly melted in his mouth. Trust Eddie to have found a great cook.

"I don't know if it's as bad as that, Peter." Eddie Plummer's familiar baritone voice cut across the dining room, making heads turn. Whitney was at his side, an arm around his waist, his arm around her shoulders, the two blond heads close together They weren't dressed as celebrities but as an ordinary couple in blue jeans and casual shirts, though Eddie would stand out in any crowd, just as Egon did. "I stopped in town to talk to Dayton Reese," the singer explained. "He was the man I bought the house from and his business partner, Philip Henderson, was the last of the original family to own it. I thought maybe Reese would know something." He turned his head at the arrival of Graves and said, "Tommy. If there's anything left could you get something for Whitney and me? If not, coffee's fine."

"There's enough," Graves said with a grin. "Be right back." The more formal manner he'd used toward the Ghostbusters when he'd been trying to pull their legs had vanished entirely. It was plain he counted himself Eddie's friend as well as employee and didn't hesitate to act that way.

The singers joined them, pulling up chairs and sitting down at the table. "Egon, great to see you," Eddie greeted his cousin, clapping him on the shoulder. "Has Janine worn down your resistance yet?"

Peter shot a quick grin at Ray, who winked and poked Winston's arm. Egon said stiffly, "That's hardly the point. You're looking good, Eddie. But your ghost isn't a nice one. He nearly took Peter's arm off."

"Hey. I'm fine," said Peter hastily, gratified when Eddie and Whitney stared at him in alarm. "Bruises are nothing to a Ghostbuster. Course the rate goes up for every injury ..."

"Peter!" chided Egon. "Ignore him, Eddie. We always do."

Peter stuck out his tongue at Egon, who pretended not to see it. "What did you learn?" the physicist asked his cousin. "Anything useful about the background of the house?"

"He didn't know anything himself," Eddie replied. "But I think he's a fan because he went all out to help me. He gave me this." Sliding his hand inside his sports jacket, Eddie produced a manila envelope. "It's the Henderson family tree," he said. "Copied out of the Henderson family Bible. Every Henderson who ever lived here is listed in there. We'll go over it after dinner."

The Henderson Family Tree didn't, at first glance, seem to be very helpful. Eddie spread the two pages out on the dining table and everyone crowded around to look at it.

"What are we looking for?" asked Whitney, leaning against Eddie's shoulder as he slid his arm around her.

"All this has is births and deaths and some of them go back to the 1700s, long before Segue was built. They called it Marathon, for some reason."

"Maybe we should look for people who died too early," offered Ray. "A lot of times, when someone dies suddenly and unexpectedly, there's something unfinished. Not everyone who dies early turns into a ghost, or we'd be up to our eyebrows in them, but sometimes they do."

"This can't tell us if any of the deaths were violent, either," Egon said, tracing down the list of names with a long forefinger.

"That character in the attic sounded really ticked off," offered Winston, who was standing behind Peter and bracing himself with one hand on the psychologist's unbruised shoulder. "And he didn't sound really young, not like a kid or anything, not even someone in his late teens or early twenties."

"True, but he was going for effect," disagreed Peter, his eyes on the list of names. "He *wanted* to sound mean and nasty, to scare us away. I wish I knew what triggered this." He glanced over at Eddie. "You guys have been here for months and you've had people up in the attic redoing the wiring and stuff. You can bet they'd have come hotfooting down again if anybody had thrown suitcases at them."

"So what you're saying is, someone triggered the episode last night?" asked Miss Corey with interest from her position across the table. "Something different?"

"The party," offered Graves in the background. He hadn't joined them at the table, but now he was approaching with a decanter of wine and a tray of glasses. He started pouring out the wine and handing it around. "This is the first party you've had here, Eddie. Maybe it didn't like all the strangers in the house."

"Yeah, but Jackson's not a stranger," objected Eddie, frowning into his glass. "He spends half his time here when we're not on tour. Yet the ghost yelled at him."

"Maybe it was the music," suggested Ray with a grin. "Peter said maybe he was a critic. If it's an old fashioned ghost, it might hate rock and roll."

Peter grinned at the suggestion. "See. I have good ideas sometimes." He muttered to Miss Corey, who did her best to hide an amused smile.

Egon nodded abruptly. "Possibly. That might make good sense, Ray."

"I said it first, but Ray gets credit?" Peter demanded. "Gee, I guess I can tell how much *I'm* appreciated around here."

"We do appreciate you, Peter," said Ray quickly. "Well, most of the time, anyway."

"I'll answer that with dignity," said Peter and stuck out his tongue.

"Yeah, but if it's rock and roll it hates, we practice here sometimes," Eddie disagreed. "We make music all the time." He frowned, lifting a forefinger to his lip, gnawing it as he considered. "Yeah, and we've got our practice room on the second floor, but it's soundproofed. Maybe the ghost never could really hear us before the party. You think it could be that simple, Egon?"

The physicist shook his head. "I should doubt it's simple at all. Yet it gives me an idea. If the ghost in the attic hates music, perhaps it would manifest if we took a tape deck with us and played it. It might become so enraged it would be unable to resist forming."

"Oh, good, he wants to make it mad," said Peter in an aside to Winston. "I don't know about you, Spengs," he added, "but it was pretty teed off without music. If you think I'm going to haul a ghetto blaster up there and try for a matched set of bruises ..." He sipped the wine. Good stuff. Eddie had the bucks to buy the best.

"It shouldn't come to that," said Ray quickly. "We can set up a tape player at the foot of the stairs and crank it up full volume. Let the entity get good and mad and then go up and zap him quick."

"Short. Simple. I like it," Peter said thoughtfully. "One question. Where do we get the padding? Helmets, chest protectors — hey, maybe even the suits of armor you've got standing in the hall out there, Eddie."

"We can't fight a ghost while we're wearing suits of armor, Pete," objected Winston, ruffling his hair. "I don't know about you but I want to be mobile when I'm up against a bad one."

"I hate that, Winston," Peter retorted automatically, reaching up to settle his brown thatch into place. "Besides, if it's gonna start throwing furniture around,

I want to be ready for it. Bruises are one thing. Compound fractures — no way."

"It did materialize when music was playing, Pete," argued Ray. "Maybe if we played it something nice and soothing, like an old ballad ..."

"Sure, Ray. Maybe a lullaby. Put it right to sleep." He bent his head over the list again. "Hey, here's something ..."

"What did you find, Peter?" asked Eddie with interest. Whitney leaned in closer, pulling her husband with her as they all peered at the list.

"I found a blank space," replied Peter, stabbing the list with his forefinger. "See, here. Born 1864, died 1883. But no name. That's weird."

"He's right," said Whitney, staring. "I didn't notice that, either. I don't think Dayton Reese did, either. I wonder why it's blank."

"Phone him. It's not that late," offered Miss Corey, her full glass unnoticed in her hand. "If he still has the Bible, he might be able to check."

Whitney made the call. She was gone a little time and then returned, her face perplexed.

"Did you find out anything, love?" Eddie asked her as she sat beside him and leaned into the circle of his arm.

She shook her head. "Not really, but I think we've got the time pinpointed. Reese did have the family Bible. He said he didn't copy out the information — his partner had done that and stuck the pages loosely in the Bible and it's those papers Henderson xeroxed for us. Reese didn't even bother to check it out before, just had his secretary copy them. But the reason this is blank is because someone either spilled ink over that spot or scratched the name out."

"Aha!" cried Peter in triumph. "This is great. We're right on target. We've got it now. A cover-up. A family scandal, and we can even check at the library or newspaper office now that we've got the year. Something happened; whoever it was died — nineteen years old. Geeze." He was silent a second, feeling sorry for whoever it was. That was no life. At age nineteen Peter had just beginning to find himself. He'd just met Egon and had started to realize it was possible to trust other people after all those years of learning he couldn't even trust his own father. He had been at Columbia, having the time of his life and gradually coming to decisions about where he wanted his life to go. This person had never had that chance. Nineteen. He shook his head. "Poor kid. That's a lousy break."

Feeling eyes upon him, he looked up to see Miss Corey regarding him with interest. It was as if he had suddenly become a microscope specimen. "Do you become so attached to all your ghosts, Dr. Venkman?" she asked.

"Heck, no," he said quickly. "Most of them are ugly wigglers that would love separating my head from my body. You've gotta move fast and blast quick for anything like that, and there's no time to get up close and personal."

"Yeah, but once in awhile we come up against one that gets to us," said Ray, grinning at Peter. "Remember Uncle Horace? He didn't want to go until he'd said goodbye to his favorite niece one last time and told her he loved her. Every now and then, one comes along we don't want to zap and trap."

"Yeah, but Mr. Nasty upstairs doesn't qualify," retorted Peter, glaring ceilingward. "A trap is too good for somebody like that."

"So what do we do?" asked Eddie.

Egon frowned. "I would rather not return to the attic without further information," he said. "Perhaps we could make the ghost materialize with music, and I would like to set up a tape deck with speakers at the foot of the stairs, and then take readings. We have to force the ghost to materialize, but we don't want to make targets of ourselves until we're sure we can trap him. If that suitcase had hit Peter on the head instead of the shoulder ..."

"It might have knocked some sense into him," said Winston quickly. Peter turned around and made a face at him.

"I see your point," said Eddie drily. "Come on, Tommy, let's go get a tape player. We can see if the ghost has the bad taste to hate my music."

It seemed that he did. When the equipment was set up, all four Ghostbusters were suited up and wearing their proton packs, and Egon, Ray and Eddie had P.K.E. meters in hand Graves reached out to open the attic door, just as Eddie pushed the play button and out poured the sounds of Eddie and Whitney in chorus, doing

Greenwillow Memories, their current chart topper. It was slick and fast and the guitar accompaniment exciting. Jackson, on the drums, thumped away in a pulsing rhythm. The butler stepped back out of range of the door to join Miss Corey a little ways down the hall.

Thrower in hand, Peter stared over Ray's shoulder at the screen of his P.K.E. meter. At first there was no response, then, with a sudden, almost instantaneous transition, the device came alive, beeping, lights blinking, grid registering. "Gee, that was quick," blurted Ray, making a few quick adjustments. "Gosh, Egon, he's sure mad. I can feel it from here, can't you?"

Peter could feel it, too, a cold sense of malevolence he'd experienced on busts before when waves of sheer hatred pulsed out toward the Ghostbusters. Most of the time, the entities they had come to bust had some understanding of their purpose, but this ghost didn't seem to care. Instead, it merely projected hatred in an attempt to frighten them away.

"He wants to scare us off," said Winston, expressing the thought that must have struck them all.

"Well, he's doing a pretty good job of it," returned Peter. "Spengs, you boy genius, can you think of any way to pull him down from the attic?"

"You *want* him to leave the attic?" asked Miss Corey in disbelief. At the first sensation of projected rage, she had drawn back a little, but once she realized it seemed confined to the attic, she had gathered herself together and now stood her ground. Peter's suggestion must have seemed like sheer idiocy to her.

"Sure," replied Peter. "The attic's his turf, after all. He knows it. Besides, he's got lots of weapons up there — all that junk; suitcases, old lamps, boxes and hatstands and stuff. If we could get him down here in the hall where he's got nothing to throw, we'd have a better chance of busting him."

"He'll have to materialize first," Egon replied. "We can't bust him until he does. Right now I'm still reading dispersed energy. Until he materializes there is nothing for us to latch onto. He's a very strong class three, and the anger feeds his power. I don't know how long he's been up there, but I'd guess over a hundred years, if he is the one who died in 1883."

"I don't know, Egon, he sounded a lot older than nineteen," Peter objected, listening carefully in case the malevolent entity showed any signs of solidifying and clumping down the stairs to confront them.

"No, he just sounded mad," corrected Ray. "He wanted us to go, but I think he's scared, too."

"*He's* scared?" echoed Winston, gesturing at the dimly lit attic. "That meanie tosses suitcases and tries to blast us out of there, and *he's* scared?"

"I think he is," Ray insisted stubbornly, looking up from his meter to eye them with an earnest expression. "He isn't just chasing us away because he wants to be alone. I think he's afraid of what we might do if we stay."

"Yeah, blast him," Peter objected. "Come on, Ray, he doesn't know what we do. If he's been up there that long, he's never heard of the Ghostbusters."

"He would have heard enough when we were up there to reason it out," Egon disagreed. He fiddled with his P.K.E. meter, his face thoughtful. "In any case, he is still not manifesting completely enough for us to trap him. Yet there is awareness. He has spread himself thin up there, as if he has *become* the attic. I suspect it has become his refuge as well as his prison."

"Well, then, hey, Eddie can saw off the top of the house and push it into the Hudson," suggested Peter brightly. "What do you say, Eddie? Just haul in a big crane and lift it right on off."

"Seriously, what shall we do?" asked Whitney, her eyes slipping toward the attic door. "I don't like to think of that much malice loose in the house, especially ..."

"Especially?" Ray prompted, looking at her expectantly, as if he'd picked up something from the new note in her voice.

A sudden smile lit her whole face. "Especially when Eddie and I are going to have a baby," she announced.

Egon smiled broadly. "Congratulations."

"Hey, great," Peter said. "Now we can see if baby Spenglers really come with hair like Egon's. When he got shrunk down to a baby that time, he still had his weird hair."

"That could never have happened," said Egon stiffly, though he had seen the photos the others had taken and was forced to believe it. "In any case, I see nothing to criticize in my hairstyle, though, of course

I could never have behaved like a baby. Even when I was a baby, I . . ." Realizing he wasn't winning this particular argument, he let his voice trail off, ignoring Peter's amused grin.

Ray beamed. "Yeah, just wait. If your baby looks anything like Baby Egon, he's really gonna be cute. When's he due?"

"Just over six months from now," Whitney said. "I'm nearly starting to show."

Egon's cheeks had reddened ever so slightly at Ray's comment. He had never really been comfortable with the thought of what had happened that time, especially when Peter had teased him about diapers. He said quickly now, "I can see why you don't want to keep the ghost, especially with a child in the house. The music isn't causing the ghost to manifest. We may as well shut it off." Eddie reached out and hit the switch and silence fell. After a few moments, the raging sensation from the attic began to ease. Egon glanced up the stairs and took a final reading. "I think we need further information. Tomorrow, as soon as it's open, someone must visit the local paper and see if we can learn what happened in 1883."

Peter hadn't made very much of his aching shoulder until he went to bed, and then, suddenly, it announced its state with a vengeance. No matter how he tossed and turned in the exceptionally comfortable bed, he couldn't find a position that let him relax. Sleep was fitful, coming and going, leaving transitory waking periods in which he blinked in the darkness, momentarily disoriented until he remembered where he was. The night was remarkably quiet. Other than the faint, near-subliminal settling noises any old house would make and the hum of locusts and the chirping of crickets outside, nothing disturbed the silence. A city boy to his boots, Peter found the quiet disturbing and would have liked to turn on a radio to break it, thinking sleep might come easier that way. He missed the familiar traffic noises at home and the sounds of his buddies snoring. Eddie had given them each a bedroom, and while Peter liked it, the quiet was more disturbing to his rest than a loud party in the next room would have been.

Once, he came out of a fitful nap into an even more confusing sense of dreaming. The bright moonlight that had glared into the window seemed muted by a heavy mist that drifted toward the bed as if it were physical and tangible. Peter eyed it uneasily, scrubbing sleep out of his eyes with his fists. This wasn't a dream. He was *awake*! So what was all that gray, oozing stuff? More country air? Or something much worse?

It surrounded him, but there was none of the heavy menace he had felt in the attic. No one growled for him to go away; instead, a sense of concern and regret permeated the fog. He was sure something touched him, though he could see no form in the mist. It hadn't coalesced into a shape like the one upstairs had done for Jackson. Though the touch was cold and clammy, almost as nasty as the feel of Slimer sneaking into his bed in the middle of the night and wanting to cuddle, Peter felt no urge to jerk away or raise his voice and summon his buddies. Instead he lay there waiting, eyes wide, to see what would happen next.

** ... sorry ... sorry sorry ...** It wasn't a voice speaking audible words as much as it was a sensation of aching regret. Peter could imagine a voice, young and tremulous and female, but he knew he wasn't hearing it in the normal way. **... would never have meant to hurt you ... He is not cruel. He fears for me.**

"You mean the luggage handler in the attic?" Peter asked, pitching his voice just above a whisper.

"Roland." This time, the word was spoken, a shiver of sound as if someone had done no more than vibrate the molecules in the air. "I feel his presence, and I know his anger, but it is not for me." The cold touch slid up his arm to his shoulder and fell unerringly upon the bruise. Peter had seen it when he changed for bed and already it had begun to darken ominously. This one would last for weeks and it was sure to be stiff and sore as blazes in the morning.

Now the cool touch stroked his shoulder through his pajamas, distinct fingers probing the afflicted area causing the worst of the ache to ease. **... sorry ...** came the regret once more, an apology for a deed done by another. **... do not hate ... do not make his hate the stronger ...**

"Who are you?" Peter asked gently. He was sure she was young, he was even surer she was frightened and miserable, and the last thing he wanted to do was scare her. Maybe she was the one whose name had been scratched from the family Bible. "Can you tell me your name?"

... would never have hurt you ...

"I know, he would never have hurt me, but he must be desperate by now," Peter soothed. He wasn't sure he quite had this down yet, but it made a crazy kind of sense. The entity who hovered over him so insubstantially stroking his shoulder was mostly incoherent as if the complete personality had not survived. Yet something had lingered, something unhappy, something frantic, something trapped. "It's all right. I only got a bruise. Can you tell me who you are?"

"I am desolation." It was the first direct answer the entity had given him. Peter couldn't quite count her naming Roland. That might have simply been what was in her awareness. But this time, she had answered. Bingo! He'd made contact.

"My name is Peter," he said without raising his voice. "I'm here to help you. Tell me your name."

"Melinda." Just a vibration of sound, so faint he had to strain for it. The cold touch lingered a moment more then lifted, and Peter was astonished when he realized the worst of the ache had vanished from his shoulder. **... help him ... please help him ...** came the subliminal suggestion, the one without a voice. **... sorry ...** It faded away to nothing, and suddenly the moon was as bright as a streetlight shining in the window.

Peter sat up cautiously, gaze roving about the room in search of shadows. When he didn't find any, he wiggled his feet into slippers and headed for the door and down the hall to the next room. Flinging open the door, he yelled, "Egon! Wake up!"

He flipped on the light at the same time and the physicist bolted up with a startled cry, pushing his hair out of his eyes and fumbling for his glasses on the nightstand. Peter sat on the edge of his bed and began to unbutton his pajama top which caused Egon to eye him dubiously. "I hope *you're* awake enough to know I'm *not* one of your girlfriends," he said drily.

That made Peter grin. "Chill, Spengs. I didn't suddenly wake up with the urge to jump your bones — and very bony bones they are, too. I like my bed partners — well — curvier than you. Look at this." He pulled the sleeve away from his shoulder and gestured at the bruise. "Check it out."

Egon's eyes widened and he gave his sliding glasses a push with his forefinger, settling them into place as he stared. "This is most peculiar, Peter."

"You tell me." Peter stared at the injury. When he'd gone to bed, it had been darkening to a deep purple-black, swollen and puffy, and now it was a faded smudge with the faint green traces of an old injury, nearly healed. The deep, throbbing ache was gone, too. "You might want to get your P.K.E. meter," he added. "Because I just had a midnight visitor and I think I've got a clue or two for us to check out in the morning."

Egon jumped out of bed and headed for the bureau, where his meter sat. He turned it on and passed it over Peter's shoulder, frowning with concentration. "Hmmm," he said in a thoughtful voice as he pondered the readings.

"Come on, Egon, you're the one person I'd expect to make sense in the middle of the night," Peter urged, grabbing the edge of Egon's nightshirt and tugging it for attention. "What do you think?"

"I'm detecting ectoplasmic residue, Peter." He reached out and slid a finger across the bruise, pulling his hand back to look at his fingertip. "Yes, though it's melting away."

"I've been slimed?" Peter echoed. "Somehow it was better this time than the way it usually happens. So what can you tell me about it?"

"It does match the readings we took in the hall when we arrived, the focused repeater. This is intriguing, Peter. Usually such an entity lacks the ability to move from the one spot or do anything different. I've never heard of a documented instance of ghostly healing before, either."

"Neither have I but maybe we could bottle it and make ourselves rich. You know, Slime, the Great Cure All. Only five dollars a bottle." He cocked his head to one side. "Or should we make it ten? Then we could buy a place like this ..."

"Peter!" Egon chided as Venkman slid his arm into his pajama sleeve again and started doing up the buttons. "Perhaps instead of dreams of avarice you could tell me what actually happened ..."

"Should we wake the others?"

"What time is it anyway?"

"Four a.m." Peter grinned, adding with a touch of humor, "And you say I like to sleep in."

Egon studied him thoughtfully. "You do look tired, Peter. I would theorize the bruise kept you awake. Now that it's almost gone, perhaps you could return to your room and get another three hours of sleep. We'll meet at breakfast and consider the possibilities. But first, tell me what happened."

"Why did I know you were gonna say that?" asked Peter around a deep yawn. He *was* tired, but if he told Egon now, then Spengs could think it over and make some sense of it by morning. "Anyway, I was just lying there, minding my own business ..."

"And she said her name was Melinda?" Ray asked with interest as he spread butter onto a piece of toast. "Do you think she's the one who was scratched out of the family bible?"

"Possibly," Peter admitted cautiously, looking around the breakfast table. No Slimer to snitch the bacon. This was great. He forked a few slices of bacon onto his plate. "She sounded about the right age. She talked about somebody called Roland, too. Anybody want to make a bet that's the nasty in the attic? She kept going on about him being angry."

"Did you ask her what she meant?" inquired Eddie, fascinated, sipping his steaming coffee. They had gathered around the breakfast table at which point Egon had told them about Peter's midnight visitor, and then the questions had begun.

"Well, I couldn't really do that," Peter answered around a mouthful of bacon. He swallowed and continued, "It's like she wasn't really there, if that makes any sense. Part of what she said sounded like a pattern, something for her to repeat over and over. The only time she really answered direct questions was when I asked who she was. I kind of got the idea she was trying to defend old Roland — because he was trying to protect *her*."

"You think he knows we were going to trap her?" asked Ray, eyes widening in dismay. "If he's trying to protect her, he would have been mad at us."

"Yeah, but he didn't throw fits before when Eddie took readings," Peter argued. "Something woke him up and made him mad. Still think it was rock and roll?"

"Well, he got awfully mad last night when we played music at him," Winston confirmed as he ladled scrambled eggs onto his plate. "Maybe we should get a tape together of classical music and play that."

"Or I could sing to him," Eddie offered. He seemed content with toast and coffee, but Whitney had a doughnut and a bowl of cereal and was putting it away with enthusiasm. Eddie eyed her with an affectionate smile. "Some of the old ballads, things like that," he continued. When they all turned to stare at him and Whitney dropped a warning hand on his arm and squeezed tight, he gave a deprecating shrug. "Well, it worked with Jaren'h in the subway."

"That was different. Music had freed Jaren'h and it took music to confine him again," Egon corrected. "Hmm. Perhaps music the ghost finds pleasing would ease his temper. It's worth a try — but only from the foot of the stairs."

"I called Jackson in the city," Eddie offered. "He's coming up this morning — we're supposed to have a rehearsal about noon. He's going to stop at the newspaper office and see if he can dig up anything from 1883."

"Don't say 'dig'," objected Winston, pausing with a forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth.

Peter grinned. "So while we wait, I think it would be swell if Eddie would give us a concert at the attic door. How about it, Eddie? We'll see if you can lull it into complacency."

"We *will* have to go into the attic eventually, Peter," Egon said as Eddie finished his coffee and went to fetch his guitar.

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

The minute they opened the attic door, a blast of angry emotion poured out at them. Egon whipped up his P.K.E. meter (fastest P.K.E. meter in the East, thought Peter with a grin) and started taking readings. "It's near to materializing," he said. "It's probably been brooding up there all night. If everyone's ready, we can go up the moment he solidifies. He's really furious."

"Why wasn't he ever furious before?" asked Whitney. "We've spent a lot of time at Segue, though that was our first party. Do you really think it was rock and roll, Ray?"

"Well, maybe," Ray replied, his face thoughtful. "One thing about rock music, when it's loud, you can feel the bass through the entire building. You should hear it at the firehouse when Peter plays his stereo. People walking around, even people in the attic, might seem

transitory, but music can shake the whole building — and music has got a lot of emotion in it. Maybe the wrong songs played."

"Then I can play the right one," Eddie volunteered, coming up to them, with his guitar slung on a strap around his neck. No electric guitars this time, just the one he used for Leftover Souls and any other more mellow sounds. "Wow!" He stopped dead as he sensed the powerful emotions coming from the attic. "He's getting worse, isn't he?"

"A lot worse," Peter agreed. "If you're gonna soothe him with pretty music, now would be a *real* good time to start." He took his thrower in hand and the other three Ghostbusters copied him.

Eddie looked at Whitney and she slid into place beside him. He struck a chord, one of the intro chords for Leftover Souls, and nodded his head to set the beat. Whitney tapped her foot lightly to pick up the pace, and instead of going into the first verse, Eddie did it with the guitar, no flashing chords, just the simple melody, soft and gentle. He began to hum along with the chorus, letting his voice gradually rise into words, and Whitney was so in tune with him, her voice soared beside his at the same moment. Peter leaned back against the wall, letting his eyes close at the sheer beauty of their voices.

Egon made a surprised sound, and Peter looked at him quickly. "What is it, big guy?"

"He's materializing," Egon reported in an undertone, as Eddie and Whitney swung into the first verse that spoke of lost love and lost lovers throughout time and those who were left behind when love was gone. Peter could sense the ghost more clearly than before, and this time, though it was still angry and defensive, it did seem to be listening. "And the anger is less," continued the physicist. "Perhaps music is the key after all. Or maybe it's simply the intention."

"So we go up there?" asked Winston in an undertone.

"Not quite yet. Let's see if the music helps." Ray was grinning, enjoying the experience, and if his eyes lingered a bit on Whitney's classically beautiful features with a kind of wistful memory of what might have been, he was so caught up in the thought of a new kind of busting technique that it was the motivating feature on his eager face. "This is really great!" he burst out. "Eddie, we'll have to put you and Whitney on the payroll."

The two singers flashed grins at him without losing a beat.

"He's coming closer," Egon cautioned in an undertone. "He's listening."

Soprano and baritone voices soared, the mellow tones of Eddie's old guitar providing a melodic counterpoint. Upstairs in the attic, the rage eased slightly. Peter had heard several different versions of Leftover Souls, but the song was essentially a ballad. He'd heard Eddie do it *a capella* once on a television special, without even Whitney or Jackson as backup, and he'd held the audience utterly breathless during that performance. When he'd finished, even before the clapping began, there had been that momentary pause that is a tribute to something very special, and in it, Peter had heard the audience almost as one catching its breath.

"... remember ever, leftover souls ..." The last line faded away into wistful silence that Eddie capped by one final E chord. From the attic, they could all feel a breathless waiting.

"You want to give us backup," Peter asked, gesturing for Eddie to start up again. This time, they began without the instrument, letting their voices do the work. Peter nodded at his buddies and started up the stairs.

The ghost was so caught up in the music he didn't sense them until they were at the top of the stairs, ready to step into the attic, and then, in a rush, the anger was back, though not as furious as it had been when they played rock music for it the night before. A wind began to circle the attic, touching the tattered remnants of old coats and fluttering the corners of stacks of magazines as it sought out its target. "I don't like this," Peter muttered under his breath. "It isn't fun."

Below, the music intensified. Though it was no louder, it was as if Eddie and Whitney were putting heart and soul into the music, giving it up as a peace offering. And that gave Peter an idea.

"Roland?" he asked, his voice tentative and expectant.

For an instant, the wind stopped. A few pieces of paper fluttered back to the floor and dust motes hung suspended in the air, dancing in the sunlight from the eastern windows. "Go away!" The same rage was in the voice, but this time there was a question, too.

"We're not going, bunky," Peter insisted. "We came to talk to you. I saw Melinda last night."

The wind was suddenly a near tornado, lifting up small pieces of furniture and boxes and driving them before its force. Peter ducked involuntarily behind a steamer trunk, and Winston and Ray, who were still in the stairwell, retreated a couple of stairs. Egon, eyes on his P.K.E. meter in sheer fascination, stood his ground, making minute adjustments on the detection device.

"Spengs!" hissed Peter sharply, waving his arms to get the physicist's attention. "Get down. He'll paint a target on you any minute." When Egon gestured abruptly for silence as he took a new reading, Peter gave an exasperated snort and dove for the blond, tackling him and bearing him down an instant before a wooden crate would have impacted with his forehead. They crashed to the floor, the box falling just behind them, and Egon blinked in surprise as he realized the danger he had ignored.

"Thank you, Peter. It's starting to materialize. Those readings were fascinating."

"You wouldn't have thought so after Roland gave you a frontal lobotomy," Peter replied, scrambling up and pulling the physicist with him into the shelter of the trunk. "Yo, Roland, we've got to talk. Can we have a time out here?"

"Take care, Peter," Egon urged, tugging at the strap of his pack. "Don't anger him until we've all got a clear shot."

"No, wait, Spengs," Peter insisted. "I don't think he's mad at us."

"This from the man who turned black and blue yesterday?" asked Winston from the doorway, his voice heavy with skepticism.

"Just tell Eddie to keep singing," Peter urged, gesturing for Ray to slip down the stairs with the message. "It helps the mood. I'm gonna talk to Roland."

"Be careful," Ray called as he darted down. "And ready to duck."

"Ducking is my specialty. Hey, Roland." Peter waved a hand above the level of the trunk. "We've got to talk. Melinda's really worried about you."

The wind stilled and died. In the sudden stillness, Peter heard Ray returning.

"You cannot know this." The voice was heavy with suspicion and disbelief, and menace hovered all around them. Soft and melodic, the singing went on, shifting to a different key as Whitney did a solo of the chorus, her voice high and piercingly sweet.

Peter popped up and glanced around, bouncing back automatically when he realized the spirit was materializing only a few feet away. At first it was nothing but thick black mist, making Peter wonder if fire had been the culprit in Roland's death, though nothing had ever been said about a fire on the premises. Maybe it was simply a sign of the anger that boiled in the spirit. Then, the entity solidified and arms spouted out, pointing in Peter's direction. The sense of fire was gone entirely now, creating an image of brooding anger, anger that was ready to lash out at any convenient target. There was something eerie about it, something that made him want to retreat to the door and clatter away down the stairs, but Peter held his ground. He felt Egon rising behind him to stand at his shoulder, and the other two emerged from the stairway to fall into line, proton rifles in their hands.

"Yesterday you gave me a good bop with a suitcase," Peter reminded the ghost, gesturing at his shoulder. "Well, in the night Melinda came. She was scared and crying and the most I could get from her was that she was sorry. She said you were angry but not at her and you wouldn't really hurt anyone. She asked me to help you."

"No, impossible." The anger swelled again. "You lie!"

"*Moi*? Peter Venkman, Ghostbuster extraordinaire? I never lie. I exaggerate sometimes, but this time, it's the truth. She was so sad," he added in a much quieter voice. "She said she knew how angry you were but she's sadder than you are angry. I asked her who she was and she said, 'I am desolation.'"

The roiling mass of blackness began to shape again, this time firming up so that features began to show. They saw a tall man, maybe thirty, wearing an old fashioned suit. His features were still a little blurred but he could have been recognized now if anyone who had known him had been present. "I must be with her," he said. "But I cannot. She does not see me. She passes through me as she runs, over and over, to save me, and she never can. I could no longer bear it, so I came up here where I would not have to see her day after day and never touch her, never draw a response. I could not leave her but I could not face her either." His voice hardened, any

momentary softening vanishing, replaced by cold malice. "You would separate us forever, and for that you will die."

"I don't want to separate you," Peter insisted as the music rose up behind them, telling of lovers left behind. "Hear that song?" Peter asked. "Listen to it. It's called Leftover Souls. That's you and Melinda now. She's lost, trapped here in a moment of time. But you're here voluntarily, aren't you?"

"That's good, Peter, get him to talk," Egon murmured beside him. "Encourage him."

"I must be with Melinda. As long as she is bound, I will stay with her. Yet I cannot be with her. That is why I know you lie. Not enough of her is left ..."

"You're right about that," Peter agreed immediately. "She wasn't entirely here. She's trapped halfway between, unable to go or stay, but she knows you are here. She knows you are angry on her behalf. She can't really do anything about it, but she knows."

"He killed me," he snapped. "Even if she had lived he would never have let her come to me."

"He? Her father? Someone in her family?" Peter prompted, working hard to sound soothing when the nearness of the angry spirit made him want to start blasting or duck for shelter. He was glad of Egon at his side and the presence of the other two near the door.

The blurred head bobbed up and down in response. Maybe he hadn't expected anyone to listen. Maybe he had been trapped with his anger so long he couldn't resist talking about it now. "The Hendersons and the Millers, for decades they had hated each other. Romeo and Juliet had nothing on us. Henderson built Marathon to show us up more than anything else. This great ugly house where he trapped Melinda and kept her away. He thought he could stop us from seeing each other but I met her in the village and thought she was like sunshine on the water. When she walked it was as if she were dancing." The near-formed features smiled in sudden memory and for a moment, the anger faded away. "We met in secret for two years," he said. "She was nearly a child and I would have waited until she was 21 but she wouldn't wait. I wanted to marry her, but she said her family would never give in — so she gave them a reason to give in; our child."

"Yeah, and the lady downstairs who owns this house is going to have one, too," Peter explained. "Hear her singing? You've been giving her a hard time, when she's like Melinda, in love and happy with the thought of starting a family."

Roland was silent a long moment as if he had never considered the inhabitants of Segue as anything but a threat to his tentative union with Melinda. Then he shook his head. "When she knew a baby was coming, she went to her father, Old Rudolph. He cursed her and told her she had shamed the family. He said he would send her away to kin in England and we would never see each other again. He said she was no longer a Henderson, no longer his daughter, and he didn't care what happened to her. She said if he didn't care, she would go to me, because I loved her if he never did. He laughed and told her he had bought me off, that I was going down into the city and would never come back.

"She didn't believe him. She said he lied. She told him nothing would stop her coming to me, if she had to search the world for me, and she ran to her room. She wrote a letter to me, telling me this, and her maid sneaked it out and it came to me that same day in the afternoon. I rode over at once."

"And let me guess," Peter said with certain knowledge. "Old Rudy wouldn't let you see her."

"He wouldn't let me into the house," said Roland, his face dark with fury. "He drove me off at gunpoint. I couldn't help Melly if I were dead. I went, but I meant to come back."

He shuddered then and put his face into his hands. The anger was replaced by horror and grief. "I didn't know anyone had told her I was here. She must have heard wrong what had happened, or maybe they just told her I was going away. She didn't come downstairs. She ran for the tower balcony, calling my name. I stopped when I heard her, and I saw her come flying out onto the balcony, pleading with me not to go, hanging over the railing and reaching out to me. She screamed that she hated her father and she would never do as he asked. He came outside and yelled at her to go in again, but she leaned down and cursed him — and that's when the railing broke ..." His voice trailed off in stunned disbelief as if, even now, he could not bear to face the memory. "She fell forever," he said in a strange, lost voice. "I thought I could catch her; I rode as fast as I could, but she hit the paving stones before I could reach her." He looked up at them, the memory etched indelibly upon his face. "I — she was dead ... I looked up, saw her father, and I went for him. It was his fault — but he

still had the shotgun, and he lifted it up and pointed it at me. He looked like a madman and he cursed me as he killed me ..."

His voice faltered again. "I ... found myself in the house. It was strange. For a long time, I didn't know I was dead. I searched for her because I wouldn't believe she was dead — and then I saw her. She came running down the hall, screaming my name, heading for the tower balcony. I tried to stop her, but she passed through me as if I were not even there." He shuddered. "I have seen her fall so many times. When I could no longer bear it I came up here and shut myself away from it. I will not leave this house because she is here — what remains of her is still here — but I will not see her die again."

"You couldn't communicate with her?" asked Ray, his voice soft and sympathetic. He wasn't even holding his thrower any more.

"No. Never. But I couldn't leave her here alone. I stayed. Eventually I came up here and made it my place. There were times when years, even decades would pass and I didn't know. I would venture down from time to time to see her running, but I always came back before she fell again. I knew I could never leave her, even if she could not communicate, could not see me. I thought she knew I was here even if she couldn't show it, and so I stayed." He shuddered. "Can ghosts go mad? I think I have. All these years — more than a hundred, I know. Yes, I have gone mad."

"But you never did anything before," said Winston. "You never scared people or haunted them until now. What made you start this time?"

"It was that music," the ghost explained. "It was so loud, so powerful, so invasive, it disturbed me. I hated it, because it was like nothing Melly and I ever knew. It awoke me from my slumber and I tried to drive it away. Then you came — and I knew. I knew you meant to separate me from Melly, and I WILL NOT ALLOW THAT!" The wind stirred again as his rage sprang back into being. "If you go from this place and never come back, I will not kill you. There have been too many killings. But if you stay and threaten me, you will die."

Peter nodded. "Too many killings? Amen to that. But hey. We don't have to separate you and Melly. We can take you away from here together."

Ray gasped. "Trap them both, Peter?" He looked like he found the idea repugnant, and even if this character had lobbed a suitcase at Peter, he wasn't really keen on it, either. He knew too much about Roland now to want to stick him in the containment unit. The character had had a lousy life and an even worse afterlife, and all because he fell in love with the wrong girl. It didn't seem really fair.

"Well, that's one way. A better one is to free Melinda."

"That's problematic, Peter," Egon cautioned, eyes on the screen of his meter. "There may not be enough consciousness there to work with."

"There was enough for her to come and heal my bruise last night," Peter argued. "She came because old Rolly here had whacked me and she was sorry. She's trapped for two reasons, because she died full of hate for her father, and because she knew, somehow, that he was dead, too. If she knew enough to come, maybe we can reach her."

"What lingers isn't a complete personality, Peter," Egon insisted, looking up from the detection device and meeting Peter's hopeful gaze. "I don't know if you can summon her. You didn't summon her last night, at least not consciously."

"No, but I'm gonna try today." He frowned as he considered it, then he reached up with his thrower and whacked himself on the shoulder right on top of the bruise.

He was a little more enthusiastic than he had intended, and for a moment, he stood there catching his breath. "Whoa! That was not smart."

"Do you think that will bring her, Peter?" Egon asked, intrigued.

"Well, she came last night because it was bothering me and I couldn't sleep. She knew what had happened, so there's some awareness. I don't know if it's trapped in the image we see in the hall or not. I think that's just a recording. But there's part of her left. It might be enough, especially if the same place is sore. She might think I needed a second treatment."

"It might help if you threw things around a little," Ray instructed the ghost. It must have been plain to Roland that Ray felt not one shred of malice toward him. "You know, really get this place jumping — but try not to hit us, okay?"

"Yeah, take it easy on us," agreed Winston with a wry grin. "We're trying to help you."

"Why would you help me?" demanded Roland in a voice pregnant with suspicion. "It is your job to trap ghosts. I heard you say so."

"No, that's not it, buddy," Peter said quickly. "It's our job to stop ghosts from haunting people when they don't want to be haunted. If you and Melinda can get together, you won't have any reason to hang around here and mess up things for Eddie — that's him, singing. And for Whitney and their baby. Can you hear them singing?"

"It is very beautiful," Roland said, pausing to listen, a thoughtful look upon his face. "Melly would have liked it, not like that other angry music that rattled the house."

... beautiful ...

Roland stiffened as if he had been shot a second time and looked around wildly. Peter glanced at his buddies as they realized it hadn't taken another attic tornado to lure Melinda here. Instead the music had done it, that and the dying of Roland's rage.

"Melinda!" Roland's voice held no anger now, only pure longing and love. She heard it, and suddenly a mist oozed from the corners of the attic, drawing in on the sound of her name as if she heard and understood. "Melinda," he breathed, just above a whisper, and held out his arms.

She coalesced into a vaguely human shape in front of him. "... Roland ..."

"I think that's as good as it gets," Peter said under his breath to Egon. "She can't form up any more than that, and I don't think she's fully aware even now, at least what's trapped here isn't. It's up to old Rolly now."

The attic ghost drifted toward her and gathered her in against him. In the silence, the rich warmth of Eddie's voice poured out from below, and Melinda's near-intangible voice said, "Roland," one more time as both spirits vanished without a trace, the mist coalescing in upon itself until it disappeared entirely. Suddenly the attic felt empty of anything but the living.

Peter heaved a huge sigh, caught himself at it and said quickly, "And I gave myself a new bruise all for nothing."

"You okay, Peter?" asked Ray quickly stepping forward and reaching up to investigate.

"Sure, Ray. After all, black and blue are my best colors." He batted away Ray's hand before he could poke it. At least he hadn't whacked himself as hard as the suitcase had done last night. Massaging his shoulder surreptitiously he saw Egon tinkering with the P.K.E. meter and asked, "So, Spengs, what's the scoop?"

"Only fading residuals," Egon replied with satisfaction, a smile on his lips. "They are gone. They deresolved peacefully."

"We do good work," Peter said brightly and gave Egon a high five, turning to do the same with Ray and Winston.

"Should we stop the concert?" asked the black man, nodding at the stairs as Whitney's voice came in on the chorus.

"Nah." Peter shook his head hastily, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "Our own private Eddie Plummer concert? Come on, let's enjoy every minute of it." He sat down on the steamer trunk and closed his eyes, prepared to listen.

"Peter!" chided Ray as Winston yelled down to the singers:

"It's okay, you can stop. They're gone now."

"So no one knew Roland had been murdered by Rudolph Henderson?" Miss Corey asked in disbelief, "Or that Melinda had fallen from the tower?"

"Wasn't a thing about any of it in the papers," said Jackson MacKensie. He had arrived just as everyone came downstairs again and now they were gathered around the dining table, sharing a cold lunch of sandwiches and salad. "There was some kind of a hint that he and Melinda had eloped, but nothing right out. I guess old man Henderson was an important person in the town and it didn't do to cross him. He covered it up. Must have buried them in secret. That's probably when he took her name out of the family Bible."

"Or maybe when he found out she was pregnant," Whitney put in. "That would have been a huge scandal back then. He might well have disowned her entirely rather than plan to send her off to distant relatives."

"And Roland might have even told his family he was going to carry her away," said Tommy Graves, picking

up a sandwich from the platter and dropping into a chair. "They would have wondered when they never heard from him again, but if they contacted Rudolph, he would have told them his daughter had been taken away by their son. He probably acted angry and high handed and blamed them and it wouldn't have occurred to them to suspect the truth. They might have thought the couple went out West or to Europe, and as time passed and they didn't hear from them, it wouldn't have occurred to them to blame old Rudolph."

"If Henderson saw Melinda's ghost, he wouldn't have told anyone about it, outside the family," Eddie said, running a finger down the family tree to Melinda's parents. "By that time, Melinda's mother was already dead, and no one was here but the servants."

"And they probably didn't dare to speak," offered Ray. "I think it was horrible of him." He took a bite of his sandwich.

"Do you suppose we could ever find where he buried them and give them a proper burial?" asked Whitney, pushing her plate away. "It's probably on the grounds somewhere."

"I can't think of any way to tell," countered Eddie. "I'm sure he didn't write it down, and even though you can sometimes tell when you find a grave — I read about it once in a mystery, something about the way the soil collapses — there's a lot of ground around here and things have changed in a hundred years. We can look, but I don't think we'll ever find it."

"It's a good thought, though," said Ray. "But that's really secondary. What matters is that they're together now. You did great, Peter, getting him to talk to us."

Peter spread his hands deprecatingly, waving his sandwich around. "Hey, what can I say. Just my natural genius at work. Besides," he added more reasonably, "I said what he wanted to hear, that I'd talked to Melinda and maybe he could, too. You've gotta know how to deal with ghosts, and after all, I'm a genius."

"Or an egotist," Winston muttered under his breath.

"Is he always like that?" asked Miss Corey, her eyes narrowing in suspicion, though her mouth kept trying to smile.

"Most of the time," replied Egon. "It's something we've learned to live with."

"I see." She looked from Peter to the other Ghostbusters and back again, and smiled a little. "Yes, I do see." Peter had the uncomfortable feeling that she could read him better than he would have liked. But then, she wasn't so bad, so he guessed it was okay. He winked at her knowingly, and to his delight, she winked back.

"I thought you guys would probably just bust them," said Jackson, ignoring this byplay.

"It wasn't necessary," said Egon quickly, a smile creeping onto his face. Peter saw it and grinned in response. He hadn't expected Egon to be sentimental about the lovers. This might be a good story to tell Janine when they got back to the firehouse. He'd play it up a lot and she'd get all misty eyed and hang onto Egon and try to cuddle. Watching Egon's reaction would be fun.

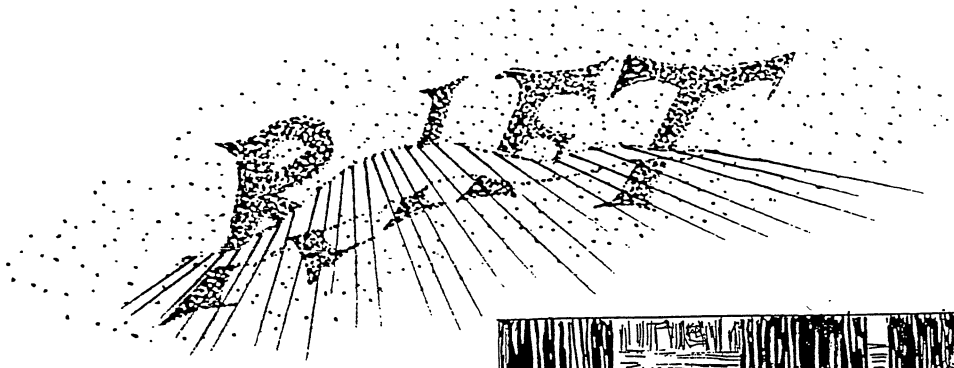
As if he'd seen Peter's secret grin, Egon continued quickly. "Just as it wasn't necessary for Peter to injure his shoulder all over again."

"What can I say?" asked Peter with an expansive gesture that made him wince slightly. "That's why she came last night. I thought she might come again for the same reason. And instead, she wanted front row seats at Eddie's concert. Here I am going through major pain and instead music does the trick. I told you guys I was in the wrong line of work."

Eddie shook his head. "No, Peter. You're in the *right* line of work," he said with complete certainty. And when Peter lifted an eyebrow in question, the singer continued, a wicked grin on his face, "After all, I've heard you sing."

Peter groaned as everyone else burst out laughing.

Sheila Paulson is editor of the *Real Ghostbusters* fanzine, **Ecto** (now up to **Ecto-3**), as well as author of many *RGB* stories and three novellas, **Exile**, **Spells** and **Demon Blues** (new for MediaWest*Con 1994). For more information about **Ecto-1** through **Ecto-3**, send a SASE to Sheila at 2408 Beaver, Des Moines, IA 50310-3904. For more information about **Exile**, **Spells** and **Demon Blues**, contact Bill Hupe at 916 Lamb Road, Mason, MI 48854 (include a SASE). The "prequel" to "Leftover Souls," "To Sooth the Savage Ghost," will appear in the excellent multi-media zine, **Shadowstar 34**, published by Mary Jean Holmes. For more information, send a SASE to Mary Jean Holmes at 10534 W. Cortez Circle #7, Franklin, WI 53132.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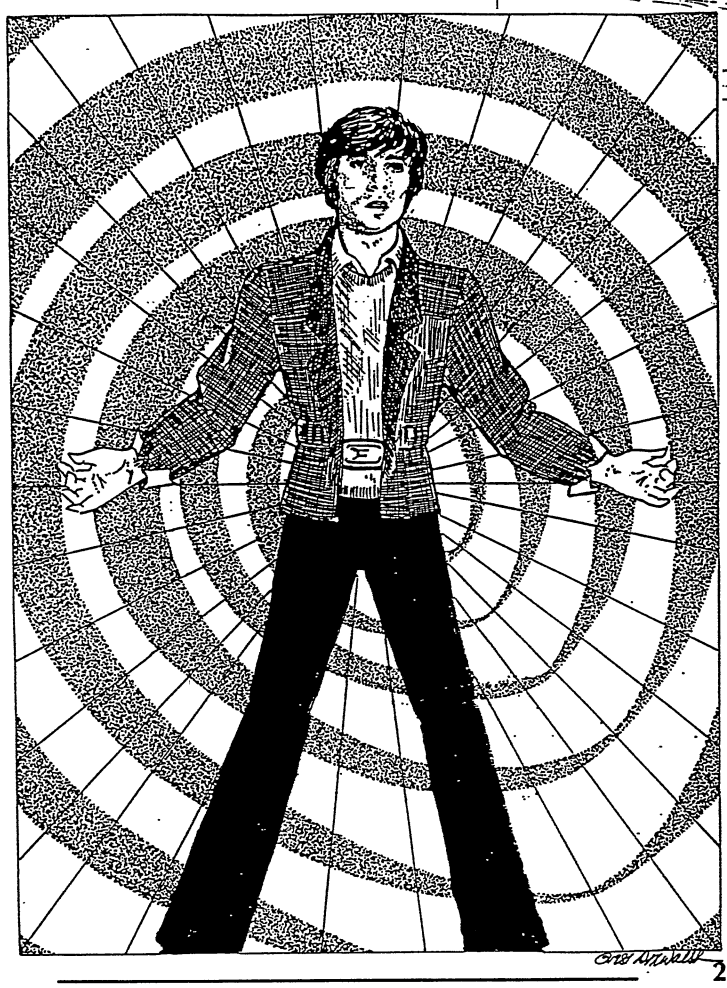

THE TOMORROW PEOPLE

Rift

by Mary D. Bloemker

Normally the ceaseless flow of information on the world's communications airwaves would have been enough to keep TIM occupied during those long periods of time in which the Tomorrow People were absent from their secret headquarters, buried deep beneath the streets of London. Lately, however, most of the accumulated data he had rejected as useless or repetitive. Leaving only two of his receivers on automatic, he turned instead to his main programming banks and began sifting through the main index of his memory. With unexpected time available to him, he decided to do a major reprogramming, setting up two new files to store information from the Watchdog satellites, placing, replacing, or deleting information as needed. A task that would have taken months on a conventional computer was the work of a few hours for TIM, who flashed pertinent pieces of hard information on his main viewing screen once in a while for his own amusement.

He was completing minor maintenance on the first file when an inner system alerted him to the fact that one of the Tomorrow People was arriving via the jaunting pad. This he noted only perfunctorily, as the part of his biotronic network that controlled the guidance coordinates of the jaunting belts was on automatic, and needed nothing from his integrated logic and personality circuits to help it along. Several bits of information filtered though, however, much as a stray thought intruded on a human mind. It was too soon for Stephen or Elizabeth to return to the lab; Stephen had at least two more classes at school, and Elizabeth had mentioned something about a staff conference after school hours. Therefore, the person who would be appearing on the jaunting pad in less than half a second would be John, who had earlier succumbed to TIM's urging to get more fresh air and exercise.

TIM's greatest concern, however, had remained unvoiced. He had long noted John's seeming reluctance to relate himself to the world that lay beyond the confines of the underground laboratory. Absorbed as John was in setting the groundwork for the future of the Tomorrow People, he was in turn becoming far too insular. It was inevitable that someday they would replace *homo sapiens* as the dominant life form on the planet Earth, just as Neanderthal had given way to Cro-Magnon. But that was a prediction for the next generation; for now, John had to realize that it was only his special powers that made him different. He still needed to eat, sleep and exercise, just like any "Sap," and it wouldn't hurt him to develop a social life either.

If it had been a human mind originating those thoughts, it would have been called brooding, and there would have been a very human expression to mirror the condition. For TIM, however, the thoughts took less than a fraction of a second to complete, passing through his logic banks without being recorded; the only outward indication he gave, had there been anyone to see it, was a subtle dimming of the multi-colored display on the four main spheres hung from the ceiling of the lab. As a human figure began to form on the jaunting pad, TIM quickly put his reprogramming job on standby and prepared to greet the newcomer.

John materialized onto the teleport platform and barely managed to preserve his balance as the now-familiar residual dizziness flashed through him again. The incident, though brief, did not escape TIM's fully alert notice. "John, are you all right?"

The young man descended into the main room of the underground lab, rubbing his fingers against his temple as he did. "Fine, TIM. I'm fine."

"You are not fine," TIM admonished. "I have noted that you seem to be experiencing disorientation after jaunting, and that it appears to be getting progressively worse."

John lowered himself into a chair, reluctant to admit that TIM was more right than even the biotronic computer could know. He wasn't sure what to tell TIM, if indeed he could tell him anything at all. The dizzy spells were occurring with increasing frequency and intensity, with the result that he had developed a reluctance to jaunt that bordered on morbid fear. Since the attacks started, nearly two weeks ago, he had been attempting to pinpoint their cause himself, and was now certain that the root of the mystery was the brief span of time he spent in hyperspace in the course of a normal jaunt. For a half a second, his corporeal being existed neither here nor there, but in that vast non-existence they referred to as hyperspace for lack of a more descriptive term. When intuition and circumstantial evidence has first suggested hyperspace as the culprit behind his odd dizzy spells, he had

Editor's Note: See the article under "Curriculum Vitae" for explanations of the terms used by the Tomorrow People in this story.

deliberately prolonged his jaunts, extending his brief stay in that non-space. Knowing TIM would disapprove of such a dangerous experiment was why even now John could not bring himself to discuss the situation with the somewhat overly-protective computer. As the result of several harrowing and near-fatal forays into hyperspace a year or so ago, they did not deliberately enter that region for any length of time beyond the normal duration of a jaunt without taking extraordinary precautions.

John looked up at the lockers where they kept the special suits originally designer for extraterrestrial expeditions. He had only dared prolong this last jaunt for seven seconds, long enough for his suspicions to be confirmed. Something had touched him, something nebulous and indefinable. A kind of static charge had coursed through him, jolting ever nerve ending and synapse. Reeling from the blow, he had had just enough presence of mind to complete the jaunt back to the lab, and not enough to effectively fend off TIM's concern.

Still looking at the lockers, John rose, in the grip of a sudden decision.

"John?" TIM said for the third time, his normally well-modulated tones edged with mounting alarm.

John stopped, his hand inches from the handle of the locker. Slowly, reluctantly, he lowered his hand again. A dangerous experiment, TIM would say. Pulling an A.E. suit out of the locker would force an explanation and afford TIM an excellent opportunity to say it. And yet ... he had to know. He had to know what it was that had touched him in the void of hyperspace; what it was that had, for over two weeks, been attempting to pull him back, causing the spells that had plagued him all this time. Again he resisted the urge to tell all to TIM. He still didn't have enough pieces of the puzzle to make any kind of coherent explanation. Why this strangeness affected only him, for example, and not Stephen or Elizabeth. Carefully phrased questions had assured him that they had experienced no ill effects from their frequent jaunts even as his attacks of disorientation had increased. Therefore, the mystery was his and his alone. And by virtue of this latest incident, he had to find the answer himself, or at the very least, the missing pieces of the puzzle.

"John!"

The young man barely noticed the sharp, almost frightened tone of TIM's voice as he turned and bounded back onto the jaunting pad. As he dematerialized, he looked up, belatedly remembering TIM. "Don't worry, TIM. I'll be back in a short while ..." His voice faded with the rest of his form, leaving the visible portion of the biotronic computer pulsing with agitation. Bereft of John's physical presence, TIM turned to telepathic contact and found, to his increasing horror, that he could not find John's consciousness.

Stephen was absent-mindedly chewing off the end of the pencil he had forgotten to lay down when he'd rushed out of maths on a lame excuse at TIM's urgent mental summons. He and Elizabeth were seated in the underground lab, deepening frowns on their faces as TIM related a brief account of John's behavior, including the odd dizzy spells he had been experiencing. They exchanged startled glances when TIM finished by informing them that he was unable to make any kind of telepathic contact with John at all.

"Maybe we're overreacting," Stephen said reluctantly, unconvinced himself. "It's only been, what ...? Fifteen, twenty minutes? Maybe he really will be back in a while."

Elizabeth was shaking her head slowly, lost in worried thought. "Something is very, very wrong. All strong telepathic consciousnesses broadcast a residual trail. TIM should have been able to pick up on that, or at the very least get his positional coordinates from his jaunting belt. And John would never intentionally reject telepathic contact from any of us, especially TIM. Under normal circumstances, that is."

"You think something's happened to him."

"I'm afraid that's exactly what I do think, Stephen."

"But TIM said he tried to contact John as soon as he'd jaunted. What could have happened to him in less than three seconds?"

They had the same thought at the same moment. Elizabeth raised her head to regard TIM apprehensively. "Hyperspace, TIM? Could something have happened to John there?"

"I sincerely hope not," was the computer's fervent reply. "Although it would explain my inability to communicate with him, since I was assuming that he would have materialized within less than a second, as usual."

"I know it's difficult for you, TIM, but could you ...?"

"I have already made a preliminary attempt," TIM said, a gentle reminder that, unlike humans, he could perform disparate functions simultaneously. He had made a sweep of hyperspace the moment the possibility had occurred to them. But, as Elizabeth had been careful to remark, hyperspace was even more difficult for TIM, with his highly integrated logic circuits, to deal with than it was for the relatively undisciplined human mind. To operate in that region of paradoxes and non-logic required a special effort on TIM's part, one that he could not effectively control or sustain over a long period of time.

"Would it help if I got suited up?" Stephen offered.

"It would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack," Elizabeth reminded him. "If he *were* somehow trapped in hyperspace, that is. TIM, I ..."

"Wait."

TIM's quiet command froze them, hardly daring to move as the silence he had tacitly requested stretched unbearably. Then: "Odd."

"What is it, TIM?"

"I am not certain, Elizabeth," the mellow voice said slowly. "It was a strong contact, but very abrupt, as though ..."

"Was it from John?" Stephen demanded.

"Yes."

The reluctance in TIM's voice did not pass unnoticed. "What did he say?" Stephen pressed.

"Nothing. That is to say, I do not believe that the contact was specifically directed. It was almost as though a covering had slipped ... and had been as quickly rearranged."

A look of consternation grew on Elizabeth's face as the implication of what TIM was saying sank in. "You mean — TIM, you don't honestly believe that John is deliberately ...?"

"The contact was from John, that alone is not a subject for conjecture. It was not a call for help, nor did it give any indication of distress whatsoever. And it was not from hyperspace."

Stephen interrupted as TIM was about to continue. "Were you able to get coordinates, TIM?"

"Yes, of course. I ..."

"Great." Stephen landed on the jaunting pad in three running steps. "Send me there and I'll see for myself what's going on."

"Stephen ..." Elizabeth and TIM said in concert, both with a familiar cautionary tone. Not willing to give them a chance to talk him out of what they obviously feared was a potentially dangerous situation, Stephen overrode their burgeoning protests with a stubborn, "I'm not going to sit around her worrying about it. The only one who knows what's going on is John, so it only makes sense to ask him, right?"

"Stephen, be careful," Elizabeth found herself saying in place of the protest she had been forming. TIM was more reluctant to be persuaded, and since it was the computer who would control Stephen's jaunt to the coordinates recorded from the brief contact, the young boy now turned anxious and impatient eyes upward. "Look, give me five minutes and you can jaunt me right back in. Is it a deal?"

"TIM, let him go," Elizabeth said, her expression betraying her uncertainty that she was making the right decision. "Stephen's right - it's the only way we're going to get an answer."

"Very well." TIM's voice communicated his displeasure so vividly that Stephen could almost imagine a glowering face in place of the colored display. The amusing mental image was still in his mind as he disappeared from the jaunting pad.

Barely three minutes later, Stephen reappeared on the jaunting pad. Without even a glance at Elizabeth, who had been waiting with growing anxiety for his return, he jumped off the platform. Throwing himself into the nearest chair, he buried his chin into his jacket as far as it would go. Immediately sensing his dark mood, Elizabeth crossed the distance quickly to stand next to him. "Stephen?" she asked gently. "Stephen, what is it? What happened?"

He stirred slightly, his mouth working as though to find words. Failing, he sighed sharply, slumping further into the chair.

"Did you find John?" she persisted.

"I found him, all right."

Elizabeth blinked at Stephen's uncharacteristically bitter tone.

"He said if you or I or any of the Tomorrow People come after him again, he'd kill them."

"Stephen!"

"He even threatened to kill *me* for trying to find him."

"That's impossible," she whispered, numb with shock. "I don't believe it."

"I wouldn't have believed it either if I hadn't been there. He was — he was *wild*, Elizabeth." His belligerence was melting away, replaced by acute distress. The young woman instinctively placed a hand on his shoulder, a mute gesture of concern. "I've never seen him like that. And I know it's impossible for a Tomorrow Person to kill, but — he meant it, Elizabeth. He really *meant* it."

Disconcerted, sick with fear, Elizabeth inclined her head upwards. "TIM?"

"I find Stephen's report of John behavior very odd — and disturbing," replied the computer's quiet voice. "I must ask you, Stephen to provide me with as much information about your confrontation with John as possible."

"Weren't you listening in?" Stephen turned a puzzled gaze toward the biotronic device whose visual manifestation was set in the ceiling of the room.

"I was unable to eavesdrop. The same anomaly that has prevented my contact with John was obviously affecting you while you were with him."

"Is it possible," Elizabeth said slowly, "that the source of the anomaly is John himself?"

"Pardon?" TIM replied.

"I mean, is it possible that John's powers could have somehow ... I don't know - mutated? Perhaps he's developed some sort of negative field that could, in turn, have affected his mind?"

"Or vice versa?" Stephen suggested grimly. "Maybe something that's affected his mind in turn affected his powers."

Again, Elizabeth looked up. "TIM?"

"It is not outside the realm of possibility."

"Which theory?"

"Both your theories are valid. However, all I know for certain is that this anomaly is not within my experience. I cannot definitely state whether it is indeed a mutation of John's powers."

"TIM, he's the oldest of all the Tomorrow People," Stephen said, sudden fear in his voice. "What if this mutation is something that's going to happen to all of us?"

"I think it highly unlikely. I must point out that I also have access to the Galactic Federation historical records, as well as medical and psych-profiles of registered telepaths and psychokinetics, which I have already referred to in an effort to trace the source of the anomaly. There is no recorded instance of mutations of telepathic or psychokinetic powers. No record, indeed, of any kind of analogous situation."

"In the Galactic Federation, yes," Stephen said. "But this is Earth, and we're the first to have these powers. And John the first of *us*."

"We cannot draw such conclusions on the data currently available to us," TIM said firmly. "Now, I must know everything John said to you, Stephen."

"I'm not sure I remember all of it," he admitted, pain sweeping his face again as he reluctantly searched for the memory. "I was so stunned that a lot of what he said didn't register. He was saying things — horrible, nasty things about ... about us. About me, about ..." He wet his lips. "... about TIM ..."

"About me," Elizabeth prompted quietly.

He nodded, lowering his eyes. "He said he was tired of playing nanna to the lot of us. We were useless whining children, and Earth would be better off if we were drowned like a litter of kittens." He stopped, his mouth a thin, white line. Elizabeth winced, not so much for the harshness of John's words, but for the obvious distress it caused Stephen to remember and relate them.

"Was there more, Stephen? I must know everything."

"He did say something else, but it didn't make much sense."

"Everything, Stephen."

"He said ..." He paused, struggling to recall. "He said that Wendy was right from the start. He should have gone with her in the first place, instead of playing nursemaid to the worthless lot of us. And ..." he raised his eyes to look up at TIM's multi-colored display, "that I should tell you from him that now that he's finally realized what Wendy was about, he never wants to see any of us again."

"Wendy?" Elizabeth repeated, confused. "Who is Wendy?"

"I'm sure I don't know,"Stephen said, a bitter edge still in his voice. "TIM?"

The two young people exchanged startled glances at the unexpected silence. "TIM?" the woman ventured, her puzzlement deepening when again the computer did not answer.

"TIM, you *do* know who Wendy is, don't you?" Stephen said, realization dawning.

It was a long moment before TIM answered, "Yes."

"Tell us, please," Elizabeth begged.

"I'm not sure I should."

"John was giving me a message!" Stephen exclaimed, his sullenness evaporating. "I'm right, aren't I, TIM?"

"That is entirely possible, yes."

Elizabeth and Stephen exchanged smiles, relieved for even the slimmest hope that there might be a method to John's apparent madness. But the curiously strained quality of TIM's usually placid voice intruded. "TIM, who *is* Wendy?" Elizabeth asked. "Please, you must tell us."

"Is she a Tomorrow Person?" Stephen put in.

"No. That is — not anymore."

"What does that mean?" Elizabeth asked, suddenly unsure as to whether she wanted to hear the answer.

"When John first broke out, he was, as you are both aware, very much alone. That he survived at all, without the help that he in turn was able to offer each of you when your special powers broke out, can be considered quite remarkable."

"It must have been awful for him," Stephen said softly, remembering his own traumatic ordeal precipitated by the sudden blossoming of his telepathic and psychokinetic powers. Elizabeth's expression mirrored his own as she too remembered her own, more recent experience. TIM's small silence was tacit agreement.

He then went on. "He made good progress in the early days, considering the fact that he had nothing to guide him, no one to advise him. In many ways, you are all very lucky that John was the first."

"I think you're trying to tell us that you don't believe his mind has broken now, if it was able to survive the shock of breaking out unaided," Elizabeth said.

"But where does Wendy fit in all of this?" Stephen said impatiently.

"Wendy was the second person to break out."

"I thought Carol was?"

"We allowed all of you, including Carol, to believe that, Stephen. But the truth is that Carol was the second Tomorrow Person, not the second Earth human to break out."

"What happened to Wendy?"

"I'm not sure, Elizabeth. John, who related these events to me much after the fact, was never sure. He was not able to reach her in time. His powers of personal teleportation developed late and by the time he had gained enough control over it to try to help her, she was gone."

"Gone?" Elizabeth dreaded the ominous sound of such a simple word.

"From what little he was able to find out, it seems that her psychokinetic powers had become erratic, out of control. Her new-found telepathic powers may have driven her mad."

"And she must have jaunted, like I did when I broke out," Elizabeth said, mentally wincing at the unwelcome memory. "Only I had Stephen and John to come after me, shock me back to the real world after I'd teleported myself into hyperspace by mistake. There was no one to go after Wendy if the same thing had happened to her; even if John had been able to, he wouldn't have known where or how or ..."

"That is a possibility, of course."

"There's really nothing John could have done, was there, TIM?"

"No, Stephen. John has accepted this, but I still feel that he bears some unwarranted guilt. He took her loss very hard — and very personally."

"So what could John's mysterious 'message' mean, TIM?"

"I'm not certain, but I think he may have been trying to tell us that he's found Wendy. And for some reason ..." He hesitated. When he resumed speaking his voice was subdued and bodeful. "... for some reason, he's determined to keep us from finding her. I sense a warning of very real danger behind his words; his inexplicable behavior toward you, Stephen, was likely the only way he could keep you from asking too many difficult questions."

"If it was, it certainly worked," the boy agreed, remembering how speechless he had been during John's diatribe. There was a warm feeling spreading in the pit of his stomach now, unknotting the fear he had been nursing since his return to the lab. "TIM, whatever's going on, we've got to try and help John."

"I agree. But I am at a loss to know how precisely we *could* help him. He has deliberately put himself beyond our reach. It occurs to me now that the brief contact that allowed me to direct you to him was calculated rather than accidental. I don't think we'll get another chance."

John pressed his hands tightly against tired, burning eyes. He was afraid to look up; afraid that Stephen would still be there, and that might goad him into an action both of them would regret. He remained still a long moment, listening. Around him he heard the gentle stir of trees in the breeze, a distant bird call. Nothing else. He looked up then, and sighed with deep relief to find that the spot where Stephen had stood only moments before was indeed empty. John now found himself the only occupant of the tiny park, but he knew instinctively that he wouldn't be alone for long. The vague tingling that heralded her arrival was beginning to spread throughout his nervous system, an echo of the first time he had sensed her in hyperspace. He suppressed a shudder, drawing the negative field closer around him. The shield was still a strong one, despite his lack of rest. Even so, she was getting stronger. He wasn't sure how long it would be before she breached his last defense. And when that happened ...

... someone ... was ... here ...

"I sent them away," he replied, too quickly. He cursed himself for the slip. He tried to force himself to turn around and failed. Another slip.

... who ...? ...

"No one." At least he was more successful at keeping edging desperation out of his voice, although he knew that to a human ear he must sound oddly strained. It was a small favor that this was one time that was not a consideration. "Don't worry about it. I sent him away, and I made sure he won't bother to come looking for me again."

In the ominous silence that followed, he gathered every shred of will-power he had left and turned around. He barely managed to quell a wince. Even though the personal negative field he had summoned to protect himself, he could feel the awesome power she possessed. It wouldn't be very much longer before it would try to overwhelm him — and succeed.

The core of the apparition was vaguely human. He had recognized it as Wendy only after her aura had touched him the second time, when he had inadvertently led it out of hyperspace. Referring to the pulsating, glowing phantom as Wendy was only a convention, however; from that second contact, he had known that little of the Earth human known as Wendy still existed. This was a mutation, a freakish concentration of sheer mental energy. Energy without control or direction. Unharnessed insanity.

He could only guess how it could have happened. They knew so little about the effects of an extended stay in hyperspace. Their one valid conjecture was that it induced an entropy effect in any matter from this universe unlucky enough to become trapped in that alternate non-universe. If Wendy had become imprisoned in hyperspace by her own inability to retrieve herself, there was no doubt that she had been effected by the entropy effect. Perhaps this mutation was the result. Somehow, this thing-that-had-been-Wendy, from that one, brief contact he had had with her mind years ago before she had disappeared, had found him, identified him as something, someone familiar. And somehow had followed him from hyperspace before he was aware of what was happening. Whether the Wendy-thing was conscious of it or not, she/s was now desperately trying to absorb him, make him part of herself. He had tried, but eventually realized that he knew no way to break her hold. The only thing he could do was to try to keep

her away from his friends, the other Tomorrow People, to prevent her from attempting to absorb and to eventually destroy them as well.

The voice, the faint specter of Wendy's mental voice, spoke in his mind again, seemingly unaware or unconcerned with his agitation. *... search place ... not find ... not ... find ...*

He tensed, not knowing how to answer. What it was Wendy was searching for, he did not know; he suspected that she — or it, whatever it could properly be called — did not know either. Telling her that her answer might lie beyond the confined of the planet had been an effort to keep her occupied long enough to get his message to TIM. A theory only, he thought that Wendy, lost those many years ago, must have tried desperately to return. But as her very form mutated, so must her purpose have changed with it. She was trying to find a place she no longer belonged to or had a rightful place in, but could no longer identify the specifics of her quest. Only the quest remained; the purpose was long along with the integrity of her corporeal form.

Whatever this thing was, this mutation, it was lethal to telepaths. Outside of hyperspace, it used the special telepathic and psychokinetic energies for sustenance and as he had sensed this, he had also sensed that it was something over which the Wendy-thing had no control. When he had first become aware of what it was attempting to do, he had been able to summon the negative shield to keep her/it from drawing off his energies, which he had instinctively known would have fatal consequences for him. The shield, however, inhibited the powers he sought to protect from the Wendy-thing's voracity, effectively cutting off his contact with the other Tomorrow People. To get his message to Stephen and Elizabeth, he had chanced letting the shield down just long enough to give TIM that fleeting contact, hoping that his wild goose chase would keep Wendy distracted long enough for his gamble to pay off. Now he could only hope that he had been convincing enough to keep Stephen and Elizabeth from coming after him again until he either found a way to deal effectively with this deadly menace — or at least to draw it away from Earth somehow. If his steadily waning shield could not hold out against Wendy's relentless siege long enough ...

"I will find you help," John said, hoping he sounded convincing. There was no change in the intensity of the flow around the blurred human core, nor any fluctuation in the pressure it was constantly exerting against his shield. No way to tell if she/it believed him, even when it said, *... must find ... must ... return ... must go ... back ... must find ...*

"You will search again and this time I will help you."

... someone ... was ... here ...

Was it possible that a hint of Stephen's strong telepathic aura lingered, enough for her to sniff the tantalizing trace? If so, John had to distract her, or she might decide to track it down.

"I will help you find. We will search together." This time he made no effort to disguise his desperation. He couldn't delay the decision any longer — he knew what it was he had to do. He'd known all along; the finality of the act was what had prompted him to make certain he had exhausted all possible alternatives before resolutely facing what was now the only alternative left. He had led Wendy into this universe; he now had to lead her back into hyperspace — and stay there. His heart twisted as he met the verdict square-on, finally, reluctantly accepting the fate he was resigning himself to.

A new impression impinged on the Wendy consciousness, transmitting itself to John through the tenuous link it had established with his mind. It took him only a moment to analyze the intrusion, and when he identified it, his heart leapt to his throat.

"No."

Whirling, he saw Elizabeth and Stephen standing at the edge of the wooded area a short distance away, confirming his worst fears. In the same instant, he sensed Wendy's reaction to the new, unshielded telepathic presences. She was preparing to reach out and envelop them, responding instinctively to her hunger reflex.

John dropped his shield for a brief, fatal moment, directing a mental shout to TIM in the breach. Wendy sliced in before he could erect the barrier again. With a cry, he clutched at his head as she burned into his mind, saturating every nerve with blinding pain.

Elizabeth started forward, grabbing at Stephen's arm as John pitched forward onto the grass near the weirdly pulsating light. At the same moment, she became aware of TIM's familiar touch in her mind; he was implanting, not words, but an entire concept in a single instant of time. The next moment, she shrank back as an invisible wall seemed to leap up around her perception of reality, her consternation lasting only the

brief second it took her to realize that *she* was the one who had erected this new mental shield. A peripheral sensation indicated that, nearby, Stephen was now similarly protected. *TIM.* TIM had given them the concept, implanting the instructions and the imperative order to utilize those instructions. Before she could gather her wits to fathom out these new developments in an already bewildering situation, her mental barrier reverberated, almost a physical blow, as though something had been thrown against it. Again and again it hit, the shield wavering but holding firm at each onslaught.

Elizabeth found herself staring open-mouthed at the strange apparition hovering near John even as the siege continued. It was pulsing violently, obscuring the already hazy human form at its center; she knew without question that it was the source of the assault.

"Elizabeth, I can't reach you," Stephen was saying, his voice strained with effort.

"It's the shield — it inhibits our special powers," she replied, still watching the specter with fearful fascination as she knew Stephen was doing. "That — *thing* — is trying to get at us."

"It's already got John."

Stephen's anguished words galvanized Elizabeth into action. She stepped forward, cautiously, toward where John lay crumpled on the ground. The battering at her shield was sporadic now, but the blows, when they came, were frenzied, insane. She had the uncertain feeling that her protection would yield long before the being's energy waned.

As she neared, she noted with relief that John was stirring, starting to get up. He stopped as his eyes focused on her as she was about to reach toward him. "Elizabeth, don't touch me."

She froze as he spoke, his voice unnaturally hoarse and urgent. "Don't come any closer!"

"I can extend my shield, John ..."

"It's too late. You'd just be letting her inside your shield. She's ... *it's* already got me, but it's not too late for you and Stephen. Get *out* of here!"

Elizabeth stared up at the awesome creature, filling with anger even as John was pleading with her. "We can't leave you like this!"

"You *have* to," he insisted desperately. "If you don't get out of here right now, neither of you will have a chance."

"The only reason you're still alive right now is because that thing is too busy trying to get to us to bother with you," Elizabeth said. "You *know* we can't leave you to that."

"Yes, you can. You *must.* Elizabeth, Stephen, please — *go!*"

His last word was a choked-off moan; he twisted as though struck, collapsing to the ground once more. In the same instant, Elizabeth felt the siege lift and knew, with growing horror, that the thing was once again redirecting its attack.

She let her shield fall away, attempting a direct contact with John's mind. The resistance she met threw her effort aside as carelessly as a child discarding a toy. But, as she had hoped, the source of the resistance just as quickly became aware of this new source of psychic energy was now unshielded, open — vulnerable. It took form in her mind, rationalizing as a huge vulture, glistening talons extended, swooping in to tear her apart.

Her scream died in her throat. Before the claws could rend at her sanity, the mind-image suddenly shattered. Something had interposed itself between her consciousness and that of her assailant. With a subhuman howl that reverberated through Elizabeth's mind, the creature retreated, venting its inarticulate fury at the mysterious presence that had thwarted its attack.

Bereft of her protective shield, Elizabeth found that she could identify her benefactor. When Stephen abandoned his shield, she wasn't sure — perhaps he had been attempting to extend his shield to her when he realized what she had done — but he, too, recognized the new presence, and voiced the relief both of them felt. "TIM!"

Both of you, you must make physical contact with John! TIM's mental voice was strained with the effort of protecting them and keeping the furious creature at bay. *Quickly!*

They obeyed, each grasping one of John's hands. As soon as the contact was completed, they found themselves the spectators of an awesome struggle. Again the mind-images rationalized. The being was a primordial maelstrom, raw emotion and unleashed

destruction. And John's consciousness was being inexorably drawn into it.

And ... TIM! TIM was there, a paradoxically solid image, a blaze of blue-hot light that pulsed with psychic energy. Even as the edges of the maelstrom reached out, tentacle-like, threatening to engulf the comparatively weak glows that were the rationalized consciousnesses of Stephen and Elizabeth, the TIM-image interposed its brilliance. The sickly black non-stuff roiled back with a shattering howl of defeat, thrashing convulsively.

John was falling, faster and faster, into the eye of the evil storm. Thin tendrils of light extruded from the TIM-image, enveloping Elizabeth and Stephen, suffusing them with strength and completing the vital union of their collective consciousnesses. From the newly formed *gestalt*, blazing appendages snaked out, touched John, started to curl around him. Thick, reeking tentacles flailed uselessly at the insubstantial light. Abandoning attack, the entity redoubled its efforts to fully claim John's consciousness. The already painfully thin strands stretched, dangerously close to the breaking point as the desperate, silent battle raged.

Just as it seemed that the *gestalt*'s lifeline had to break, sacrificing John to an unthinkable fate, the maelstrom abruptly exploded, sending an unearthly howl pounding through the void as the oily, evil mass reared up, threatening to engulf them utterly.

Then, sudden calm. The *gestalt* was shattered; Elizabeth, bereft of the unique contact, did not move, dared not breathe. TIM's light no longer enveloped her; Stephen's consciousness was no longer comfortingly close. Blackness surrounded her now — she was alone. Fear knotted in her throat, preventing her from screaming, as she had been sorely tempted to do, or crying, as she now wanted to do.

Tentatively, she reached out into the silence. *TIM?*

I'm here.

Elizabeth! Relief colored Stephen's contact. *Are you all right?*

With a boundless joy, Elizabeth realized that the blackness was caused only by her tightly closed eyes. She raised her head and looked around at the peaceful park, at the sunlight streaming down through the trees. Nothing had been disturbed, nothing to mark the horrific battle that had been fought here. Meeting Stephen's gaze, she saw that his eyes were as glazed over as she knew her own must be. Together, they broke out in weary smiles of relief and embarrassment.

They still tightly held John's hands as he lay between them on the ground. Elizabeth noted with mounting concern that his skin was cold to her touch, and his face had an unhealthy pallor.

"TIM?"

"Yes, Stephen." They knew it was not their imagination that TIM's voice sounded very, very tired. "I suspect you do not fully comprehend all that has happened."

"Is it gone, TIM?" Elizabeth ventured. "Is it really gone?"

"Yes, Elizabeth. And it will not return to threaten or harm any of you, ever again."

"We almost lost John, didn't we?"

"Yes, Stephen."

"Is he all right?" Elizabeth asked worriedly.

"He has undergone a tremendous strain, both mental and physical," TIM replied, and Stephen and Elizabeth exchanged a look at the markedly reserved tone of the voice. "His life force has been dangerously drained by his ordeal."

The words were like a hand pressing against her heart. "TIM, will he survive?"

The answer came, reluctantly. "I am not sure."

"Isn't there something we can do?"

"The reanimation technique!" Stephen said suddenly. "TIM, Elizabeth and I could transfer enough of our life energy to John to get him past the danger point, couldn't we?"

Elizabeth was regarding him oddly. Noting her confusion, Stephen explained quickly, "Kenny did it for John and me once. He saved both of our lives. So I know it's possible."

"Possible, yes," TIM enjoined. "Do not forget, however, that at that time I was available to augment the transfer. I will not be able to perform that function this time. My own resources are dangerously low and to jaunt John back to the lab would further endanger his life."

"It's worth a try. Elizabeth, concentrate as hard as you can."

She did, at first unsure of what she was expected to do. Stephen reached out with his free hand to grasp her wrist and with his mind to guide her through the essential steps. Only then, as the vital contact was closed, did she become aware of how much the battle with the entity had drained their own energy reserves. A moment of panic verged at the thought that they would not have enough to spare to save John, but TIM's mental voice calmed her fears and redirected her concentration.

We're doing it, Elizabeth! It's working!

Stephen was right — she could feel the life energy flow from her, diffusing through her fingertips where they grasped John's hand. She could feel him warming as the transfer coursed through him, knew that his failing bodily systems were rallying with the sudden inundation of new strength. She could also feel herself weakening fast, however, prompting another moment of fear that she would not be able to keep it up for as long as might be needed. Just as she thought she could continue no longer, however, TIM's welcome voice said, "It's done."

Stephen released the contact slowly, letting them return to full awareness like a swimmer resurfacing. Freeing his hands, he raised his head to the afternoon sun, closed his eyes, drew a long, heartfelt sight — and flopped wearily onto his back in the grass. "We did it," he murmured, exhausted. "We did it ..."

Elizabeth resisted the impulse to follow Stephen's lead, and gazed down at John. Color had returned to his flesh, and his hand was now warm to her touch. All lines of pain had been erased; he was, to all appearances, peacefully asleep.

TIM?

He is well, Elizabeth. You and Stephen succeeded in restored the much-needed balance. All he needs now is to rest quietly.

He's not the only one. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open. Nearby, Stephen had already succumbed to sleep, a fact she noted with bemusement.

Barely fifteen minutes ago, John had sent Stephen away with words that would have inflicted bleeding wounds on even the most insensitive of souls. As hurt and confused as the young boy had been, however, it had been Stephen who had insisted on returning, Stephen who had unhesitatingly initiated the reanimation technique knowing full well the danger to himself because of his own weakened state.

The memory of Stephen's hurt and anguished face haunted her as she closed eyes that refused to stay open any longer. She found herself wondering if Stephen could really forget what John had done to him; what must have been more of a soul-shattering experience than the nightmarish struggle with that storm-thing. Only time would tell, she thought fuzzily, welcome sleep starting to twine around her senses. Time would tell ... and hopefully, heal.

Quietly, without fuss, TIM activated their jaunting belts, bringing them home.

TIM alerted Elizabeth and Stephen the moment he sensed John stirring awake. When the young man's eyes finally flickered open, the first thing he saw was Elizabeth standing at his bedside with a steaming cup of sweet tea. He accepted it with a readiness that assured them that John was well on his way to recovery.

He winced as the hot liquid scalded into a hollow stomach. "I think I'm ravenous," he said with surprise.

"You should be," TIM enjoined. "You've been asleep for nearly two days."

"Two da —" He sank back with a groan eliciting amused grins from both Stephen and Elizabeth. The younger boy indicated the tray he held in his hands. "TIM thought you might be in the mood for some of these."

"Scones!" John's eyes lit up at the offer of a rare favorite. He reached eagerly for one, but stopped it halfway to his mouth. His gaze flicked across both of them, then settled on TIM. "These two haven't been sitting around here all this time, have they?"

"I sent them home, John," TIM assured him.

"Not without an argument," Elizabeth amended, with Stephen offering a firm nod of agreement.

"I am relieved to see that you are feeling so well, John," TIM went on.

John stopped again, this time looking down at the half-eaten scone in his hand. "I really don't remember much of what happened after Stephen and Elizabeth showed up." His expression darkened. "Why did you come after me? You could have been killed."

"So much for your odd little messages," Stephen returned, bristling at what he took to be superciliousness on John's part. "Next time you want us to steer clear, maybe you'd better come right out with it instead of wasting our time with word puzzles."

John was staring at him, breakfast forgotten. There was an indefinable quality in the young man's expression, as though Stephen's unexpectedly heated words had struck a chord of fear in him. TIM spoke quickly. "They insisted on going after you, John. They used the coordinates from your meeting with Stephen on the chance that you would still be there."

John drew in a long breath, looking away a moment. When he turned back, it was with an obviously forced smile. "Well, we're all here, relatively sound. So, I gather one of you was able to pull a trick I hadn't thought of. Is anyone talking?"

"Well ..." Elizabeth exchanged an uneasy glance with Stephen. "When that ... *thing*, whatever it was, came at us, TIM got through to us and told us how to shield ourselves."

"Thanks to your timely warning, John," TIM interjected.

A subtle change came over Elizabeth's face as another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. "Oh, I understand now. That's why you didn't have any protection — you had to drop your own shield to contact TIM."

"TIM, you promised us an explanation when John was up and about," Stephen put in, unable to contain himself any longer. "It's your turn now."

"That being did not possess a reasoning intelligence," TIM picked up without missing a beat. "If it had, it might have easily destroyed all of us. It was acting on pure instinct, and, as a result, it was only able to attack a telepathic consciousness that possessed a physical presence."

"You mean — you could fight *it*, but it couldn't fight *you*?" Stephen guessed.

"Or couldn't *find* you to fight you," Elizabeth added.

"I believe that is correct. That is why I was able to shield all three of you."

"You didn't just shield John, you pulled him back," Elizabeth said, suppressing a shudder as the images of the mental struggle flooded back. "And then it just vanished. Disappeared, as if it had never been there at all."

"Not precisely. Having the inability to deal with unexpected resistance from an invisible source, the entity's consciousness retreated. What you sensed as a disappearance was actually a physical retreat to what it knew as a place of safety."

"Back to hyperspace?" John ventured.

"Yes. That has, after all, become its natural habitat."

"But what's to prevent it from coming back?" Stephen asked nervously. "Or finding us in hyperspace again?"

"The entity's last vestige of sanity has snapped as a result of the conflict," TIM assured them. "What little was left of the consciousness that was Wendy no longer exists."

Stephen's eyes widened. "Wendy?"

"It was that last shred of sanity that compelled her to follow John and to return to this universe," TIM continued. "Without that, she — *it* — has no reason to come back or to seek you out."

It was with a sympathetic pang that Elizabeth noted John's expression as TIM spoke. He stared ahead, eyes unfocused, his mouth drawn in a tight line. He blamed himself for losing Wendy the first time, and now he had lost her again. An empathetic twinge for Wendy intruded as well, heightened by TIM's dispassionate recital of the girl's ghastly fate.

"There's nothing any of us could have done, then, was there?" she spoke softly, regarding John intently as she did.

"No, Elizabeth." TIM's voice was firm. "Wendy — what is left of her — is now back in her natural element, with no reason to seek out any other. It would not be too much to presume that she is even ... at peace."

This gained the multi-hued ceiling display a sharp stare from John. He broke into a reluctant smile after a

strained moment; an afterthought, he popped the rest of the scone into his mouth.

"Now that we're satisfied that you're all in one piece, appetite included, I think I'd better make an appearance at school. I do have a job to do, after all," Elizabeth smiled. She moved off as she spoke, gathering her purse from a nearby chair. Stephen was about to leave after her, but John reached out suddenly, stopping him with a hand on the boy's arm.

"Stephen, those things I said to you when we were in the park. You do ... understand, don't you?"

The boy stared at him for a long moment. He seemed about to say something, but hesitated. As if suddenly aware that his pause was threatening to stretch into a dangerous silence, he shrugged lightly and broke out into a laugh. "That nonsense? I knew it was an act. Never doubted it for a minute."

John remembered the shock and deep hurt in Stephen's eyes too vividly to believe that, and the strange look that Elizabeth, standing at the teleport alcove, directed their way confirmed it. Seeing that John remained unconvinced, Stephen pulled a long-suffering grimace. "Of *course* I understand. Honestly, John, sometimes you worry too much."

John returned his smile wanly. "I supposed I do, don't I?"

In the small silence that followed, Stephen suddenly extended his hand. An unsuccessfully suppressed grin curled mischievously at the corner of his mouth as he said, in a voice pitched for John's ears alone, "Welcome back, Nanna."

Despite himself, John burst out into a laugh. He gripped Stephen's hand warmly, gratefully. The boy nodded, finally letting the smile break out, letting John know without a shadow of a doubt that the incident was forgiven and forgotten.

Stephen seemed about to speak again, but stopped, alarm widening his eyes. "I'm late!" Scooping up his satchel on the run, he bounded up on the teleport platform to join Elizabeth as the young woman called, "Look after him, TIM!"

The smile on John's face faded even as their forms did, and he stared at the platform for a long moment after they had dematerialized. "Was there really nothing any of us could have done, TIM?" he said quietly.

"Yours was a valiant attempt, John. But Wendy did not truly exist anymore. I assure you — there was nothing any of us could have done."

He fell silent again, thinking. There was so little they really knew about themselves, this new race of *homo nova* of which they styled themselves the forerunners. That something like what befell Wendy could have happened to any one of them unlucky enough to have become trapped in her circumstances was a sobering thought.

John shook himself free of the train of thought, settling back and closing his eyes. If there was one thing to be gained from this, it had to be experience. Valuable experience. He would never again allow a potential Tomorrow Person to slip away.

The Tomorrow People stick together. That's what makes us special, not just our powers. We'd be no better than sideshow freaks if we didn't stand by each other. We know who we are and we know what we are. And we know what we have the potential of becoming. We're the only ones who understand. The Tomorrow People stick together. It's our only hope for survival.

The Tomorrow People stick together. That's what his mistake had been with Stephen, thinking he could be pushed away by mere words.

Wendy, wherever you are ... I'm sorry. We're sorry. It was too late for you, too soon for us. The only thing we can hope for now is peace — for both of us.

But from this moment onward — the Tomorrow People stick together.

Tomorrow Child,
I can't tell you what your life will be.
Time will show you roads that I can't see.
And if they carry you away from me,
Then go with love ...

Whatever travels you may wander through,
Whatever wonders you may someday do.
Take my lullaby along with you,
And go with love,
Tomorrow Child.

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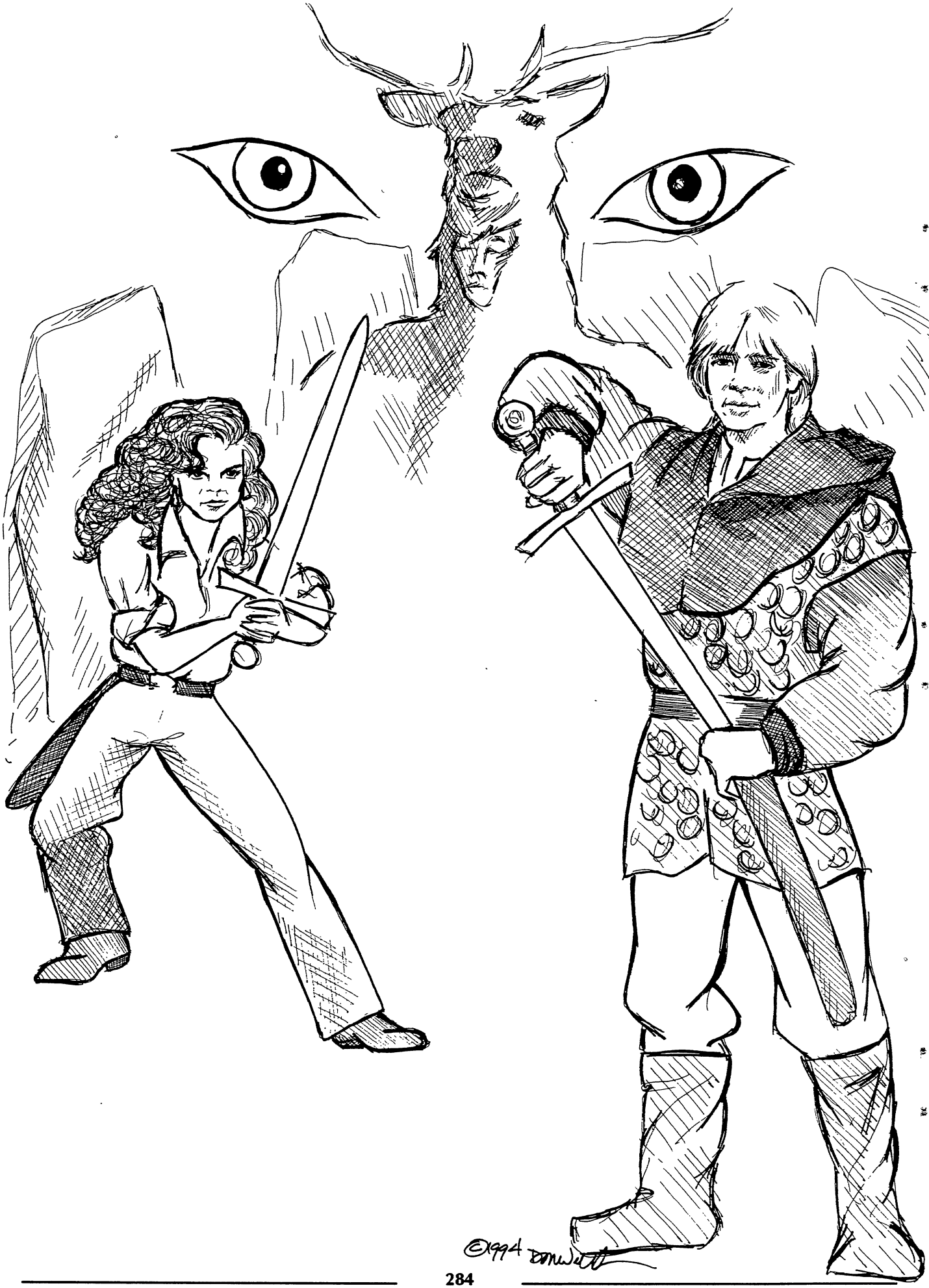
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She-Wolf of London

ROBIN OF SHERWOOD

Sword of the Wolf

by Deb Walsh

MY DEAR CHILDREN:

WORKING WITH CARLSON ON DIG. OPERATING ON TIME-SHARE. FABULOUS FIND, MAY BE YOUR SOLUTION. COME AT ONCE.

MASON.

The telegram had arrived only two days before, delivered by a Western Union courier to the television station. Ian had torn it open with trembling hands; he was of the generation where telegrams always brought bad news. But the news had been cryptic yet promising; his old Oxford mentor, Professor John Mason (deceased), had found something in his wanderings.

Operating on "time-share." Randi had to laugh. What Mason was time-sharing was Carlson's body, since his own was quite dead and long since washed away in the Thames. She'd have loved to have seen how he negotiated *that* arrangement.

Before she and Ian had left England for sunny California in 1991, Professor Mason had come to lecture at Ian's university, staying at his parents' bed and breakfast. Ian had gone into a total panic, all the while hoping that the Professor would finally offer him a job in his Oxford department. In fact, that job had been Mason's intent, but two wayward spirits had put paid to the plan.

Those two spirits — Ivan, a fanatical Ruritanian patriot, and Sarah, or Svetlana, the surviving daughter of the Ruritanian dictator — had been battling for 100 years by the time their paths brought them back to the Matheson Bed and Breakfast, where they had both died so long before. Taking over the body of Ian's mother, Sarah had asked the Professor how a spirit could escape from another to achieve its final reward; Ivan had used Ian's father's body to kill Mason just as he'd puzzled out the solution. But Mason, having solved the puzzle, transported his own spirit from his dying flesh into the body of Ian's Aunt Elsa. As the two Ruritanian spirits had moved from body to body — not always human — Ian and Randi had raced to discover their secrets. When Ivan had taken over the body of a cockroach (Randi still winced at the memory), Ian had managed to crush him, effectively and permanently killing him.

With Sarah/Svetlana finally on her way to her eternal peace, Professor Mason had elected to explore the world through his new eyes — eyes opened up to the reality of magic and myth by the incursion of the ghosts, his own survival beyond death, and Randi's lycanthropic nature. Before bidding *adieu* and leaping into the body of a passing cat, Professor Mason had promised to search for Randi's cure and get in touch immediately upon finding it.

That was more than three years ago. In the meantime, she and Ian had both been killed and resurrected, had moved from London to Los Angeles, and Ian had gone from university professor of mythology to paranormal talk show host and best-selling horror novelist. Randi had given up her doctoral work to become his producer, while his Aunt Elsa acted as his agent. Instead of being chained up in the Matheson dungeon on the first night of the full moon, each month Randi was shackled to the concrete wall in a specially-built room in the beachhouse they shared — platonically, of course. They'd done all this in the cause of finding a cure. (Well, all right, Los Angeles had it over London when it came to the beach.) Despite meeting vampires, trolls, wizards, cursed movie houses, aliens from other worlds, and witches, they had had no luck in finding a cure. And they had discovered that the transformation could be triggered by passion, as well as the full moon. The situation was becoming desperate.

The telegram was the first time they'd heard from Professor Mason since that day he'd left the Matheson house. And for Randi, it was a lifeline, a hope, in a world where little hope remained.

"What d'you mean, you're going back to London? What's London got that Los Angeles doesn't? Huh? You gonna tell me the babes are hotter there? Yeah, right," Skip Seville, station manager of KBLA and Ian and Randi's boss, scoffed in his characteristically smarmy and offensive way.

"My parents, for one," Ian replied archly. "And quite a bit of culture, for another."

"And it's not like we're returning permanently — Ian has a family emergency that can't wait, Skip," Randi

put in, smiling through her clenched teeth. What she really wanted to do was sock Skip in the nose and be done with it, but Ian didn't want to burn his bridges until they knew they had a cure.

"And you're going as his nursemaid? Hah!" Skip snorted.

"No, she's going as my fiancee," Ian pointed out with dignity.

"That's right, I'm going as his ... did you say, 'fiancee'?" Despite her righteous anger at Skip, Randi melted immediately, turning to Ian and coyly stroking his suitcoat lapel. "Fiancee?"

Ian looked down at her tenderly, Skip forgotten for the moment. "Fiancee. If you'll have me," he added, closing his hand over hers.

"I'm gonna hurl," Skip complained. "I suppose next you'll be telling me that you'll be married at Winchester Cathedral!"

"I was rather hoping for something a bit more private," Ian admitted. Patting Randi's hand affectionately, he turned back to Seville, his expression sober once more. "But that doesn't change the fact that my mother is ill and needs me there."

"What, don't they have doctors in England?"

"Of course we have doctors!" This was getting to be too exasperating. "What she does not have is her son, at her bedside, in her hour of need," Ian stated in a clipped voice. He really was getting rather good at creative lying. "I am taking personal leave time for a family emergency, and Randi is, too. You can't stop us, Skip — it's in our contract."

"Contracts are made to be broken, boyo. You step on that plane and I'll replace you with *Badminton with Bambi* so fast your culture'll curdle."

"And won't the Board just love how their ratings hit the cellar?" Randi commented acidly. "You know *How Strange* is your top-rated show. You can't afford to lose it."

"And you have plenty of programs to repeat. A few weeks of reruns won't hurt, and while we're in England, we can research some new guests. Scholarly guests, guests who actually have something interesting to say. Guests who keep their clothes on."

"Why would I want *them*?" Skip asked inanely.

"Why, indeed?" Randi repeated, shaking her head. "C'mon, Ian, let's go. We've got to pick up the tickets and get packed."

"Right," Ian agreed, offering his arm to Randi. "We'll be in touch," he told him, and together they exited Skip Seville's office.

In the seat beside her, Ian was deeply engrossed in a hefty tome on Saxon mythology. Boning up. Professor Mason was sure to quiz Ian, as he always did, on the more obscure deities and myths in the world pantheon. And since Gareth Carlson's specialty was Saxon and Celtic archaeology, he'd had a hunch the majority of questions would revolve around those subtopics in the genre. Especially since Gareth Carlson had been Ian's one great rival at university.

Randi shook her head, smiling, and smoothed out the telegram again, rereading it for the one-hundredth time. The last time she'd felt this excited had been on her first trip to England, her journey to study under her hero, the author of *The Face of Fear*. The man sitting beside her. That was before she'd gone out to the moors to study primal mythology in the raw and gotten bitten by a genuine werewolf. Hopefully *this* trip would turn out better.

"You're going to wear that out, you know," Ian said softly. Randi looked up into his brown eyes. They still had the power to turn her to jelly. Firmly, she put that thought out of her mind; she'd already transformed into a werewolf on one transatlantic flight — she didn't want a repeat performance.

"I know," she answered, chagrined. She folded the telegram and put it away in her knapsack. "It's just ... it's just that ... I'd like to hope, you know? That maybe this time ..."

"Maybe this time we'll find the cure?" he asked, taking her hand in his. "I know. Me, too." Although his words were positive, his tone of voice implied the opposite.

She shook her head, negating his tone. "I've got a good feeling about this, Ian. I really do. This time ... this time we'll find it." He squeezed her hand and went back to reading his book.

The reunion at the Matheson Bed and Breakfast had been emotional, Ian's mother bursting into tears every time she looked at her son. Dad Matheson was gruff as usual, but he'd hugged Randi with an enthusiasm that left her ribs aching. When Ian made his announcement about their engagement, pandemonium erupted.

"Wow, and I thought you guys were just gonna live together in sin," Ian's nephew Julian put in.

"I'll have none of that talk in this house, young man!" Dad Matheson bellowed.

Julian shrugged and went back to his comic book. Aunt Elsa merely grunted, but she did reach over and pat Randi's hand, smiling.

"Did you ... did you see your brother while you were in the States, Ian?" his mother asked plaintively.

Ian's twin brother, Neville, was still incarcerated in a state correction facility outside of Baltimore, Maryland. A career criminal, Neville had been serving time now for five years. Julian had been shipped home to his grandparents when Neville's wife had passed away. Dad Matheson considered this just one more black mark in his black sheep son's copybook. Mum Matheson doted on Julian, trying to recapture his crooked father's lost childhood.

"Sorry, Mum. We never got out to the East Coast," Ian answered uncomfortably.

"Oh. I wonder if they'd let him out for your wedding?"

"They didn't let him out for Ian's funeral, I don't see why they'd spring him for Ian and Randi's wedding," Julian commented cynically.

Ian and Randi exchanged glances, shuddering inwardly at the memory of Ian's death at his department head's hands. None of the family knew that he had truly been dead, brought back to life by the power of the reconstituted Staff of Gilgamesh; Ian had claimed to have gone underground to catch Dr. Stevens and bring her to justice.

"It wasn't a real funeral, Julian. The Home Office was aware of my undercover work," Ian pointed out, lying through his teeth. He really was beginning to excel at that.

"I don't even want to think about that time!" Mum exclaimed. "Randi, dear, how long will you be staying?" she asked hopefully.

Randi looked at Ian. "Well, we'll be staying here just for the night — we're going up to meet Dr. Carlson tomorrow. But we'll be back in a few days," she amended in an effort to forestall another shower of tears. "I expect we'll stay a few days before we have to get back to LA." She glanced meaningfully at Ian; they'd have to be back to make use of the dungeon below at the full moon.

"Yes, Mum. And while we're here, I can go through all that junk you've been accumulating for me."

"You're not going to stay? You're going *back* to Los Angeles?"

Ian shook his head slowly. He stood up and went over to his mother, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I have a very good career in California, Mum. We're only taking a vacation. There's no future for me here in London, Mum," he added gently.

This of course set his mother off again, and she ran from the room wailing. "Now look what you've done!" Dad shouted, racing after her as quickly as his bulk would allow.

"It's been boring without you two," Aunt Elsa piped up. "Nice to have you back. Did you remember my autographed photo of Adrian Zmed?"

"Ah, I *have* missed this!" Ian crowed as he steered his car onto the motorway. Wind whipped through his hair as he threw his head back laughing.

"I thought you liked that fancy car you bought in LA," Randi yelled over the windstream.

"Oh, I do, I do. It's just that nothing can compare with a classic!"

Their leave-taking from the Matheson household had once again been tearful, but with Ian's car out of storage and loaded with their luggage, the duo had taken to the road early to miss the morning traffic. Thanks to directions forwarded to the B&B, they were now on their way to their reunion with Professor Mason/Gareth Carlson.

"Y'know, I hadn't realized how much I missed your family until we got back," Randi commented, holding her hair from blowing in her face.

"Yes, absence does make the heart grow fonder," Ian agreed.

Oh, goodie, he was in one of his pedantic moods again. Randi grimaced. "No, I mean it. LA's nice and all, but this ... this is home," she added.

"This is *my* home, yes," Ian replied, tilting his head toward her as he manoeuvered around a lorry. "I was born here. But Los Angeles is *our* home."

"I was *born* there, yes. But when I think of us and home, I think of your parents' place."

"We are *not* going to spend our wedded life living in my Mum and Dad's B&B, Randi."

"You really *are* serious about that, aren't you? Us getting married, I mean. But what if this isn't it, Ian? What if we don't find a cure *this* time, either?"

He glanced over at her, his expression sympathetic. "We'll find a cure. We've got a month of leave and considerably more cash than we ever had when I taught at the university. That gives us more flexibility. If Professor Mason's discovery isn't it, then we can afford to go to places more likely. I thought you said you had a good feeling about this."

She paused, considering. "I do. But you don't. So why marriage? We can't do anything about it — we can't *consummate* as long as I've got my monthly curse."

He was silent for a while, his eyes focussed on the road ahead. Finally, he reached over with one hand and squeezed hers. "I suppose ... because I love you, that's why."

She squeezed back, looking at him. "I guess that'll do."

It was more than 100 miles from London to the dig site outside Wickham. When Ian and Randi pulled up in front of the local inn, The Pig's Trotters, Randi was enchanted. This was the way she'd always envisioned England — Tudor buildings with thatched roofs, mullioned windows, and dark little pubs with ancient beams and worn barstools. Ian grumbled every step to their room, hauling more than his fair share of the luggage because the quaint little Tudorized Pig's Trotters had no help beyond the desk clerk at this time of day, and "Sorry, sir, I'm afraid I can't help with your bags — it's my lumbago, y'see, sir."

Finally they made their way to their room, and Ian huffed and puffed his way in with the bags. "Come on, Ian, you're in good shape. All that running you do, this should be a piece of cake," Randi called as she skipped up the stairs with her knapsack and overnight case.

"Chivalry is not dead," he kept repeating to himself like a mantra. "Chivalry is not dead. And I shall not wring Randi's pretty little neck ..."

"I love it," Randi breathed as Ian reached the head of the stairs. She dropped her bags and ran out to grab more from Ian. Suddenly overbalanced, Ian stumbled and fell face-first into the room, a room flooded with light and smelling of fresh lavender.

"Randi!" he exclaimed as he picked himself up from the chaos of the luggage. "Oh. I say."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" She looked at the massive four-poster bed that dominated the room. "Oh."

"Ah."

"Maybe they've got another room ..."

"The desk clerk said they're full up. All the people from the dig." He walked over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "We've risen above the flesh under more tempting circumstances, Randi. I don't foresee a problem here, do you?"

She looked at him for a long moment before replying. "No, I guess not. Keep thinking of Aunt Elsa's cooking. That should put the kibosh on anything remotely romantic ..."

He laughed and let her go. With a wistful glance at the huge bed, he turned to gather up their baggage and begin unpacking.

Professor John Mason, in the body of Dr. Gareth Carlson, met them himself with the dig's main Rover shortly after the bar opened. His expansive greeting, loaded as always with magniloquence, was at odds with the weathered, almost emaciated figure of Carlson. Ian took an odd sort of pleasure at seeing how the dashing figure of his college days had aged. He puffed out his

chest and smiled broadly, extending a well-tanned hand in welcome.

"Ah, my children! Have I wonders to show you! Have you dined?" he added, glancing in to the bar, from which wonderful smells wafted on the early afternoon breeze.

"Shall we?" Ian invited, gesturing toward the pub.

Mason was uncharacteristically silent as they were seated and gave their bar orders to the barmaid. Or bar matron; the woman looked old enough to be Randi's mother. When their drinks were served, Mason took a long, satisfying pull from his pint and sat back, sighing.

"Ah. Real ale. Wonderful stuff."

Ian sipped at his beer, watching the Professor, who smiled enigmatically.

"I have one word for you both. *Wayland.*"

"Wayland. Ah. Anglicized name for the Norse forge god Volund. Brought to the British Isles by the Saxons —"

"Yes, quite, my boy. The forge god. Creator of the sword of Beowolf. 'Wayland's work.'"

"Right. There are many legends about places connected to Wayland —"

"But no one has ever found physical evidence that he existed. It has always been assumed that he was a variation on the forge god myth, like Vulcan and Haephaestus. Until now."

"You found Wayland's burial chamber?" Randi asked, incredulous.

"Better than that, my dear. His *forge.* Oh, and his burial chamber is of course connected to it. But the forge. The artifacts! Exquisite work. And one thing in particular which I think you will find fascinating."

Both Randi and Ian watched him with anticipation, but he would explain no further. Their food arrived and he tucked in with relish. "All in good time, my children. All in good time."

"Of course Carlson's done some very good work. But he was never the mythological scholar that you are, Ian. No, it took my expertise to unlock the secrets of the manuscripts he discovered."

Ian basked in the approval of his old mentor, while Randi champed at the bit to get to the site and see this fabulous artifact Mason kept referring to.

"Yes, a manuscript dating back to the time of Gildas. Possibly lost since before the time of the Venerable Bede. But the story of the burial of Wayland ... wonderful stuff."

"You're absolutely positive it's Wayland himself?" Ian demanded. Not that he doubted the possibility — if the woman he loved could be transformed into a slavering wolf every month, then anything could be possible. But the discovery of the tomb of a Norse god?

"Indubitably. The chronicle in the manuscript very specifically details many of the artifacts in the forge. And, my boy, we found 'em. Them and many others. It's a find that'll make the world forget Sutton Hoo ever existed!"

It was impossible not to be infected by Mason's enthusiasm. A find like this would ... well, it would make Carlson world-famous. Ian felt a twinge of jealous rivalry surface at the thought. But if it brought with it a cure for Randi ...

"And the artifact that you want us to see ..." Randi prompted.

"First I want you to read the manuscript. Then you'll see the real significance of it."

They rounded a bend and found themselves on a dirt track cut into the woodland. The Rover bounced and bucked as Mason barrelled down the makeshift roadway, but soon they could see the outlying tents of the dig site. Mason floored the accelerator and suddenly, they were there. He bounded from the vehicle and motioned for them to follow him into the single trailer in the camp, obviously the center of operations. He went immediately to a large safe, incongruous in the primitive surroundings, and quickly dialed the combination. Reverently, he extracted an ancient scroll, and carried it to the work table. With great care, he unrolled the scroll and weighted it with implements from the table. Then he stepped back, spreading his hands to present the scroll.

Randi peered at the scroll, but could make no sense of it. Ian pressed in eagerly, lips moving as he slowly translated the text. "It's in Old English," he said absently, his forefinger touching the fragile scroll to follow the words as they reformed in his head. " ... and in the forge stands the Sword of the ... *Wolf* ... as great a sword ... as any Wayland forged ... a sword of magic so great ... that none may wield Ulfhel — 'wolf death' — save the one ... the one she was born to ... I can't make out that last word," Ian said, straightening.

Mason stared at the word Ian indicated, and smiled. "Serve. At least that's how I translate it. Carlson, too. Interesting, don't you think?"

"A sword? We came all this way for a *sword*? How's that supposed to cure me?"

"Well," Mason prevaricated. "It's the Sword of the Wolf. The *magic* Sword of the Wolf."

"Yeah. And it was probably intended to *kill* a wolf, not cure it."

Ian draped his arm around Randi's shoulders and smiled. "We won't know until we look at it, will we? Can we see it now, Professor?"

"Right this way," Mason replied, gesturing toward the trailer door. "We none of us have removed it from the site." He stopped suddenly and looked at them. "Ah. We'll have to go into the barrow. You two really aren't dressed for the occasion. Let me get you some gear and you can change first, right?"

A little while later, clad in workboots, coveralls and hard hats, Ian and Randi rejoined Professor Mason/Carlson at the buttressed entrance to the barrow. The mound was enormous, rising nearly 100 feet high and extending for nearly an acre. Ian peered dubiously into the dimness beyond. "How did you locate the entrance?"

"The manuscript, my boy. Amazingly precise directions, if one makes an educated guess or two. Now, let's go take a look at history."

As they descended the rough-hewn steps cut into the ground, they could hear the steady hum of the portable generator that kept the lights illuminated. All other sound was muffled, deadened by the earthen walls of the stairway. Randi was reminded uncomfortably of their sojourn into the warrens beneath the cemetery when they had first confronted Dr. Stevens and her army of the dead. She shivered with the memory and grabbed onto Ian's arm for reassurance.

Mason led the way, holding up a lantern to brighten the places between the lights strung along the roof of the excavation. They drove deeper, and they could feel the turn of the path as they veered toward the burial chamber and forge. After a few moments, they found themselves facing a linteled doorway and the shimmer of ancient gold.

"Wow!" Randi breathed, looking into the chamber. Along the perimeter of the room stood shields, daggers, goblets and jewelry of sublime artistry. Toward the back of the chamber stood a dais of roughly carved stone. On the dais rested a massive sarcophagus. Randi took a step toward the coffin. "Is it ... ?"

"Yes," Mason answered softly. "The final resting place of the smithgod Wayland."

The body, strangely mummified; was small, twisted. The legs were pitifully warped, the kneecaps skewed in such a way that Randi winced with sympathetic pain.

"'Let them straightway cut his sinews of strength and set him then in Saevarstath ...'," Mason quoted.

"Poetic Edda?" Ian ventured, attempting to place the quote.

"Volundarkvitha," Mason agreed approvingly. "Perhaps the longest surviving Wayland poem. And there he lies, the maimed god."

Randi looked up, her face sober. "Cruel."

"History is cruel, my dear. Would you like to see the forge, now?"

Silently, the trio left the burial chamber and made their way further down the excavated corridor. All around them was the heavy scent of earth, the cold tang of minerals. The smell of candlewax and indefinable, ancient odors mixed into the aroma as they came closer to the entrance of the forge.

If the burial chamber had contained a wealth of magnificent handiworks, the forge was beyond price. Randi and Ian moved slowly, reverently, hushed beyond words by the opulence of the artifacts. Finally, Randi's eyes came to rest on the statue of a wolf, wrought in gold and resembling the illuminated wolves that sometimes appeared in medieval manuscripts.

And the sword clutched in its paws. Her hand moved of its own volition toward the blade.

"I wouldn't touch it if I were you," Mason warned. "A few years ago, I'd have thought nothing of taking it up and testing its weight. But the passage in the manuscript ... well, it may well be cursed, you see."

Ian came over to stand by Randi as she examined the sword without touching it. A magnificent weapon, it would have stood nearly the height of a man of the early centuries of the first millennium, A.D. Down the center of the flat of the blade were inscribed runes, deeply etched into the metal.

"Have you translated the runes?" Ian asked quietly.

"No, I'm afraid it's a dialect none of us is familiar with. Breathtaking, isn't it?"

Ian nodded, contorting himself so he could see more of the runes beneath the paws of the golden wolf. Randi stood still, mesmerized by the sword. Suddenly, she began to speak. "Here be I, Ulfhel, killer of wolves. Safe be the hand that wields me, for I will never harm her."

"What did you say, Randi?" Ian demanded, straightening.

"Huh?"

"You ... you — don't you remember what you just said?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Randi, my dear, I'm afraid you did," Mason pointed out, coming over to join them. He bent to peer more closely at the sword.

Randi laughed. "I didn't say anything," she insisted.

"No, my dear, of course you didn't," the Professor agreed quietly, glancing toward Ian. "Well," he added, standing up. "Why don't I show you some of the artifacts we've already removed and catalogued?"

Back in the trailer, they'd changed out of their gear, and Mason showed them the records of the dig, as well as the artifacts that the dig team had already cleaned and tagged. After appropriate murmurs from Ian, he spent the next hour explaining how he used the scroll and his own knowledge of myth to locate the entrance to the barrow and the corridor leading to the burial chamber and forge.

"More than likely, when the forge was actually active, that linteled doorway was open to the world. The amount of earth moved to create the mound is phenomenal — makes you really appreciate the ingenuity of the ancients, don't you think, m'boy?"

"Mmm," Ian agreed, his attention split between Mason's monologue and Randi's odd behavior. Since they'd entered the trailer, she had been sitting silently on the trailer's couch, staring out the window toward the mound. "This is fascinating. Don't you think so, Randi?"

She didn't answer, simply continued staring.

"Randi?" Concerned, Ian went over to her and jarred her slightly.
She shook herself and looked up. "Ian? What's wrong?"

"I could ask the same of you. What's with you?"

"With me?" She laughed. "Nothing's with me. I'm just ... thinking ... is all," she added, her gaze drifting back toward the mound.

"Uh-huh," Ian agreed slowly. He made a show of glancing at his watch. "Look, it's getting sort of late. Why don't we head back to the inn, eh? Have some dinner, a little wine ..."

"Splendid idea!" Mason concurred heartily. "The inn serves a particularly nice steak and kidney pie. Let me just let the team know I'm leaving the site, and I'll be right with you." With that, Mason/Carlson bustled out of the trailer.

Ian sat down beside Randi, putting his arm around her shoulders. She turned briefly toward him and smiled, then turned back to the window. "What is it, Randi? What's got your attention so ... riveted?"

Randi shook herself, turning back toward him. "I don't know," she answered, sighing. "There's something about that mound. I feel ... I feel it ... calling to me. It's weird."

Ian's other arm came around to hold her in a light embrace. "If Professor Mason is correct and that is Wayland's tomb, then those artifacts in the forge could well be magic. And dangerous. It's time we got you away from here."

She nodded slowly.

"Good. Besides, it's been a long time since I've had steak and kidney pie. Come on."

The steak and kidney pie was as good as Mason had promised, and as the distance between Randi and dig site had increased, the effect on her seemed to pass. The pub of the inn was full to capacity, with locals, tourists and members of the dig team. Replete and sleepy, Ian and Randi finally made their goodnights shortly before midnight, hauling themselves up the stairs to their room wearily.

Ian changed in the bathroom down the hall, while Randi had first dibs on the bedroom. The church bell tolled midnight as Ian was brushing his teeth. With a quick swipe of his fingers through his hair, he tied the belt on his bathrobe and returned toward the room. He walked into the room to feel the chill of air blowing through the open window, and glanced around apprehensively. "Randi?" he called out. No answer. Then he heard the roar of a gunning motor and he dashed to the window.

His car — his classic, beloved car — was peeling out of the inn's parking lot, a spray of dust and gravel erupting from beneath its squealing tires. At the wheel was Randi, her long hair whipping in the wind created by the car's speed. He called out once to her, then grabbed his clothes and shoes and tore down the stairs.

Mason was still in the bar, regaling his colleagues with yet another story about Gareth Carlson's days at Oxford. Ian had struggled out of his bathrobe on the headlong rush down the stairs, and was now clumsily pulling on his shirt.

"Professor! I need your car!" he demanded, racing into the pub.

"Ian, my boy —"

"Your keys, Professor! Now!" The panic in his voice was a physical presence. Mason's eyes widened, and he dug into his pocket.

"Randi?"

"She's taken my car, I've got to get to the dig," Ian explained quickly, grabbing the keys and turning on his heel. Mason leapt up after him, and as Ian tore open the driver's side door, Mason was already folding himself into the passenger's side.

"Drive, lad, drive!" Mason commanded.

The Rover screamed out of the parking lot into the night.

Ian's car, with Randi at the wheel, slammed down the track toward the dig site. Randi stared ahead, expressionless, as the car shuddered and kicked its way along the rough road. Finally, the car swerved to a stop outside the site trailer, and Randi jumped out of the car, running toward the dig entrance. A soft gleam, like light reflecting off gold, met her as she plunged down the stairs.

Moments later, Mason's Rover made its noisy way into the clearing near the trailer. A little over a mile back, they'd had to pull over so Mason could take over rather than find themselves lost. Ian had managed to wriggle into his clothes and shove his feet into his shoes by the time the Professor had pulled into the clearing, and was racing across the clearing to the entrance to the mound as Mason switched the ignition off. Mason was right behind him. Both men stopped short at the sight of Randi, hands clasped around the hilt of Ulfhel, the blade raised toward the sky. Slowly, she rose up the stairs, her lips moving to a chant, only the rhythm wafting toward them on the night breeze. An eerie light shimmered up the blade, reflecting off Randi's nearly immobile face. Odd sounds filled the night as Ian gasped. An invisible force seemed to hold them in place, and Ian bellowed, turning his will to move his legs. Suddenly he was moving again, sprinting toward Randi.

Mason shook himself, staring at the pair converging in the clearing, Ian wild with panic, Randi serene in the weird glow of the sword. "Ian, no!" he yelled, and with a supreme effort, he too was running toward the tableau.

Abruptly, Randi stopped, her arms rigid as she held the sword aloft. As Ian came within a few feet of her, she turned toward him and snarled. Ian stumbled back a step; Randi was in the first stage of her transformation, yet the full moon was still several days away. Her voice grew louder, the words growing more distinct. She spoke a language he didn't recognize, but he could sense the power behind it as his skin began to crawl. Mason came up behind him, gasping for breath.

"I don't recognize the language," the Professor admitted. "I think we're hearing something that hasn't been spoken on this earth for more than a millennia," he added softly.

"I don't care what it is," Ian hissed. "It can't have her."

Randi's voice was still rising in volume, urgent, commanding. A thunderclap crashed, a bolt of lightning rent the night. Ian looked up; a whirlwind was forming overhead, descending toward Randi. "No!" he shouted, and heedless to his safety, leapt at her, attempting to wrestle the sword away from her. She struggled mightily, arms locked over her head, but Ian held on against her superhuman strength. "Help me, Professor!" he commanded, and Mason jumped into the fray. The whirlwind continued to spiral down toward them, lifting Randi's hair in a swirl above her head. Bits of gravel from the track whipped around them, dirt stung their eyes, yet they held on. Her voice lifted higher, ringing with triumph, as the whirlwind touched down around them. Sound amplified beyond pain, and suddenly, there was blackness.

Grimstone Abbey sat atop the escarpment like a leprous toad, silent, dark, reeking of death. He lifted his sensitive nostrils to test the air. Innocent and damned had died there; death had no qualms about the morals of its victims. The death was old, at least a few months, but the scent was still there for those who knew how to sniff it out. Grimly, he turned his horse toward the Abbey and urged it up the trail.

Robert of Huntingdon made his way through Sherwood at daybreak toward Herne's cave. Spring was struggling to bloom in the forest, a spring that was less dreadful than the one he had feared the previous autumn. Somehow, the Sheriff and Gisbourne had managed to convince the King that the villages had had no grain stores to offer the King's soldiers, and reprisals had been few. The grain his band and the villagers had stored in Sherwood had seen the villages through the winter, and now with spring approaching, they had hope of a better harvest.

Since he had left his home at Huntingdon to accept the mantle of Robin i' the Hood, Herne's Son, Robert had visited Herne's sanctuary but a few times. The man-god came to him more often than not, but this time, Herne had summoned him in dreams. Unlike his predecessor, Robert was not of the fey, but he could recognize urgency as well as the next man. Something had disturbed Herne, and Herne's Son must heed his call.

He reached the edge of the lake and pulled the reeds away from the boat that rocked gently at the shore. Silently, he slipped into the little craft and guided it toward the island which Herne held as his own. Birdsong accompanied the muted lapping of the water against the boat's sides, a soft whisper of newborn leaves in the trees urged him on. Finally the coracle nudged the far bank and Robert tied it off on an outcropping and trudged up the muddy slope toward Herne's cave.

The sun was rising to its full glory as Robert entered the cool dimness of the cave. Herne was seated before a pot hung over a fire, his antlered headgear resting beside him. Herne the man looked up as Robert shadowed the doorway.

"You've come. Good," Herne greeted him.

"You called for me — what else could I do?" Robert replied simply.

Herne nodded, satisfied with the answer. He gestured toward the rocky bench across from him and Robert sat down.

"What is it, Herne? Why did you call me?"

The man-god — more man at this moment than god — drew a deep breath and looked directly into Robert's eyes. "Gulnar is dead. Yet there is another who would herald the Time of the Wolf. And he is coming to Sherwood."

Robert's eyes widened as he sat back in surprise. "Who else could summon Fenris?" he demanded.

"Gulnar was an opportunist, a man hungry for power and ready to take on any evil cause that might quench his hunger. Fenris was an opportunity. But there are others who follow the Wolf out of devotion, not desire. One such is coming, drawn by the battle that held Fenris at bay." From his side, Herne picked up a leather drawstring bag and opened it. He withdrew a handful of pungent herbs. "I cannot see clearly ... this one has great power, greater than Gulnar. A sorcerer of ancient evil."

"Can we stop him? What weapons do we have against such power?" Robert pressed, leaning forward.

"Others come to Sherwood. Strangers are drawn, some friend, some foe." The herbs were scattered over the smooth surface of the water in the pot between them. A fine mist began to rise from the cauldron, scented with the herbs. "Your foe bears the mark of the Wolf. Your friend you will know by the sword he carries. The work of Wayland." He shook himself. "Ever Wayland. He forges your destiny as he forged the swords of power."

"How soon?" Robert asked. "How soon until the strangers come?"

Herne looked deep into the water, squinting to make out the images only he could see. Yet again Robert regretted the fact that unlike Robin of Loxley, he could rarely pierce the veil beyond this world. Herne shook his head. "They are here. The time is coming, soon. You must prepare. You must find your allies and gain their support. Together you can defeat the Wolf."

"And what of you, Herne? What can you do?"

The mist became a fog. Herne's voice was muffled, dreamy. "The Wolf is the hunter. The hunter becomes the Wolf. Wolf against Wolf. The past sets the future, the future decides the present."

"What do you mean, Herne? What does it all mean?"

Herne shook his head. "Go, now. Everything is confused. You must find the sword-bearer. The sword is the key."

"Unhngn ..." Ian Matheson groaned, every inch of his skin and at least 99% of his joints and internal organs aching. No, make that 100%. He felt like a walking ... laying ... advertisement for Exedrin.

"Ian?" a plaintive voice whispered, and he felt a stirring beneath him. Randi! Opening his eyes — a definite mistake, but necessary under the circumstances — he saw Randi crumpled beneath him and quickly rolled over. He immediately regretted the action, and the steak and kidney pie he'd had for dinner threatened to make a sudden reappearance.

"Oh, my," breathed another voice not far away. Mason/Carlson! Another moan from Randi captured his attention and he crawled painfully back to her side.

"Randi! Randi, are you all right?" he asked urgently.

"Ooooh," she moaned. "What hit me — I feel like hell," she added, trying to lift her head.

"Join the club," he replied, touching her face. "Do you remember anything?"

"Um, dinner, then up to the room, then ... a sound, like bells. And drums. And ..." She opened her eyes warily and blinked. Another blink. "What the hell —"

Ian looked around him and took in the scenery with a jolt. Where were the tents, the trailer? The cars? The ... the mound was there, but there was no opening, no reassuring lights, no sign of the excavation. Where in hell were they?

Mason was picking himself up from the ground, and stood staring around him. The sky overhead was lightening, presaging dawn. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto," he quipped, immediately raising his hand to his head, grimacing as though in pain. "Uhhhn," he commented. "I don't suppose you remembered to bring some aspirin, dear boy?"

Ian and Randi struggled to their feet, Ian shaking his head, and Randi leaning heavily on the staff — no, the sword — in her hand. "Where did this come from?" she demanded.

"You don't remember."

"Ian — what —"

"I'm afraid, my dear, that you may be the one Ulfhel was meant to serve."

"Oh, come on, Professor —"

"The Professor's right, Randi. You left the inn, drove out to the site, and when we got there, you were carrying the sword and chanting some weird language."

"You're telling me this sword did that to me. You are!" She dropped the sword and jumped away from it, screeching. "What the hell is going on?"

Mason looked up at the brightening sky and frowned. "I'd say the sword has its own agenda, and we've found ourselves with a pretty problem."

Ian followed Mason's gaze and his eyes widened. No telephone wires. No jet trails. In fact, the sky was clearer than he'd ever remembered seeing it.

Something distinctly odd was going on, and he wasn't sure he liked the conclusions his mind was drawing. "I think you're right, Professor. We're not in Kansas anymore."

Looking over toward the mound, Mason nodded. "I think it's safe to say we're still in England. But when?"

He laid his hand upon the shattered remnants of the rudely-carved wolf and shook his head. The crudity of its shape mirrored the crudity of Gulnar's design. The druid had always been heavy-handed, inconstant — his master, Fenris, had been a passing fancy to the wizard, a means to an end. No, this time, this time would truly be the Time of the Wolf. Perhaps not today, not even next year, but when it arrived, there would be no resistance, only rejoicing by the hundreds, thousands, millions of Children of the Wolf.

When his pack arrived, he would put them to work to clear away the debris of Gulnar's ill-fated — and ill-conceived — attempt to break the bonds of Fenris. On the edge of awareness, he could hear the Great Wolf's discontent at having been wakened, then thwarted. Unfortunate, but the fault was Gulnar's. With care, planning, and patience, the world could be prepared properly. And he was nothing if not patient. For a thousand years and more, he had tread the earth in search of ways to free his master. And now he had the perfect plan, the perfect pawns to set upon the chessboard of history. He, Wulfring, would set the stage for the triumphant ascension of Fenris from the pit.

But Gulnar had chosen a promising site from which to mount the campaign. With the monks dead, the Abbey was a defensible fortress, its stone walls had withstood tumult and battle before. It was only Gulnar's arrogance and stupidity which had led to his defeat. There was sufficient room for his pack to grow, and the surrounding countryside was populated enough to provide both prey and followers to his cause, yet far enough from power to avoid immediate notice. And the forest of Sherwood was home to one of Fenris's oldest enemies, the Lord of the Trees, Herne.

By accident or design, Gulnar had chosen this location well. And he would see that the choice bore the fruit of his god.

"God, it's cold," Randi Wallace complained as she trudged down the rutted road with Ian and John Mason. Even though the sun overhead told them it was near noon, the day was cool, and their modern clothing offered scant protection from the chill.

"This *is* England, after all, my dear, not sunny California," Mason pointed out, quite reasonably.

"It's not any England I've ever seen," she retorted sullenly. "Just where are we?"

"On the King's Road, friends," came a voice from above and to the right of them. The trio halted, glancing around warily. A rustle from the undergrowth, a soft thud, and suddenly three men moved out onto the track, each proffering dangerous looking weapons. One, a giant of a man, carried a large pole or staff in both hands, waiting. Another, smaller and younger, held a bow, arrow cocked and ready to fly. Brandishing a dagger at them, the third man was a scruffy-looking man in his late twenties, unshaven — and unwashed by the smell of him. "And there's a toll to pay hereabouts," said the man with the blade.

"Look at how he's dressed," Randi whispered to Ian as the three travellers moved into a closer knot.

"'Ere, you're a woman!" the man exclaimed, lowering his dagger slightly. "You three — where you bound?" he questioned suspiciously.

"Bound?" Mason echoed. "We're travellers — and lost ones, at that, my friend. What is this place?" he asked.

"You don't know where you are? That's a laugh! You're in Sherwood, that's where you are! And everyone who passes this road's gotta pay a toll. Or die. What's it to be, friend?"

Randi and Ian exchanged puzzled glances, Randi mouthing the word "Sherwood" to Ian and widening her eyes apprehensively. Ian reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet. Mason did the same, while Randi slid the sword out of her makeshift scabbard — a combination of her belt and her jeans' beltloops — and stuck the point of the sword in the ground in front of her and followed suit. They didn't notice the trio of ruffians react to the sight of the sword, nor their backward step away from the travellers. Ian rummaged through his wallet and extracted a handful of notes, thrusting them forward.

"What's that, then?" demanded the leader.

"Why ... money, of course," Ian replied, puzzled. "You said we had to pay a toll —"

"Right! That's not money I ever seen — it's no good to us. Gold! Silver! Copper!" Still keeping his eyes on the sword in front of Randi, the leader sketched a dagger stroke in the air. His companions continued to stand still, weapons at the ready, awaiting a signal from their leader. "Where you from?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Quite a ways away, I'm afraid. We are unfamiliar with the customs of your land," Mason replied calmly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of coins. "Is this more of what you're looking for?" He held out the coins and the leader came up and put out his hand for them; Mason dropped the coins into his palm.

Puzzled by the strange shapes and even stranger markings, nevertheless the leader nodded. Ian glanced quickly at Mason and nodded, pulling out his change and dropping it into the outlaw's hand. Glancing apprehensively at the sword still standing at Randi's feet, he announced, "That'll do. Robin Hood's men don't take more than they need."

"Robin Hood!" Randi repeated, incredulous. "Then you must be —"

"Scarlet. Will Scarlet. Now be on your way," he commanded, stepping back a respectable distance from the wicked-looking sword.

Randi reached to pick up the sword and Will stumbled back, hands held up to ward off the expected swordblow. "What's your problem? You've got our money, we don't even have anything to buy a meal with! Now you're acting like a fool!" Exasperated, Randi tucked the sword back into her belt. "Men!" she swore under her breath, stalking off down the road, sword slapping at her behind as she marched.

Behind her, the outlaws stared wide-eyed at the hellion. Then Will looked back toward Ian and Mason, who stared equally wide-eyed at the retreating back of Randi Wallace. Will shook his head in commiseration. "I don't envy you."

"You don't know the half of it, my boy," Mason replied airily as he tugged on Ian's arm. "Let's go — she's gaining ground."

As the pair moved off, the younger man shot out his arm to grab at Ian's. "Is it true? What she said? You don't have any money now?"

Ian stared at the young man, puzzled. "You've just robbed us. Why would we still have money we could spend here?"

The young man mulled this over for a moment, joined by the giant. "Give it back, Will," the giant said in a soft voice. "We've no quarrel with honest travellers, friend," he added, nodding to Ian and Mason.

"John!" Will protested, but the fierce grimace of the big man quelled the objection, and with a surly expression, Scarlet handed back the coins. "If I find out you lied to us ..." he threatened darkly.

Mason beamed as he swept up the coins and deposited them in his pockets. "Thank you, kind sirs. Could you tell us where we might get a bit to eat?"

"Nottingham's back that way," the young man answered, nodding toward the way they'd come. "But you daren't show your faces with a sword like that one."

"Nor clothes like those," added Scarlet, shaking his head. "The Abbott'd declare your lady friend a witch, more'n likely, what with them trousers of hers."

"Then Nottingham's out," Ian pronounced. "We can't risk losing the sword. And Randi's not likely to part with her jeans."

"Newark's a fair way — and the King's men billet there. Best you try one of the villages, or maybe one of the alehouses. You can't miss 'em — just follow your nose," advised the big man with a grin.

"You'd best be movin'," Scarlet added. "She's out of sight."

Ian whipped around, peering down the shaded trail. Randi had disappeared into the woodland. With a bellowed, "Randi, wait up!" he tore down the road after her. Mason shrugged apologetically, and stuck out his hand. "Thank you again, sirs. Might I have your names?"

"I'm Much," answered the young man. "Much the Miller's son."

"And I'm John Little, of Hathersage," the big man replied, shaking Mason's hand.

"And I'm John Mason. Good morrow to you, sirs!" he called, running after his companions.

"They're not from around here," Will observed darkly, then turned and hit John in the arm. "What'd you make me give back their money for, eh?"

John shook his head. "Come on. Let's get back to camp," was all he said in reply.

"Absolutely fascinating," Mason gasped as he caught up with Ian and Randi. Randi was still marching at double-time, her bright eyes and flaring nostrils an easy indication that she was still seething.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Professor," she snapped irritably.

"Oh, I am. To meet three of the most famous figures in British balladry! Do you suppose we might actually meet Robin Hood? Oh, this is splendid!"

"Yeah, right, maybe we can borrow his tights. I'm cold as sin!" she complained. "And I'm tired and I'm hungry and I hate this place."

"Then slow down," Ian cajoled. "You're practically setting fire to your shoes."

Randi stopped suddenly, exhaling forcefully. She drew a deep breath to calm herself, then looked at Ian. "What are we going to do? Where the hell are we, and how are we going to get back home?"

"It's not where, my dear, it's when. And I'd estimate we're in the thirteenth century. That's about when the ballads of Robin Hood originated."

"Dandy. I prefer Kevin Costner, myself. What are we doing here?" she demanded, walking over to the edge of the road and settling onto a rock.

"I think you're holding the answer," Ian pointed out, nodding toward the sword. "And I don't think we'll get home until whatever it wants is done."

Randi looked at the sword sourly, then dropped her chin onto her fists. "So. What do we do?"

"Well ..."

"I think the first order of business should be getting ourselves something to eat. I'm famished," Mason observed.

"Me, too. What do they eat in the thirteenth century? Nuts and berries?"

"Actually, the dishes of the era tended to be quite rich — heavily seasoned to mask the flavor of rotting meat, I believe. The simple folk would probably make due with some sort of porridge or gruel, if they could get it. Filling, although not too palatable."

"I think I just lost my appetite."

"Perhaps foraging in the forest might be just the ticket. Nuts and berries. Perhaps we could fashion some sort of sling — I used to be quite good with a catapult in my younger days. We might catch a rabbit."

"We might catch the Plague," Randi countered nastily.

"Oh, no, my dear — that doesn't come along for several more centuries."

"Oh, goodie — something to look forward to."

"Oh, Christ, give it a rest," Ian snapped. "Let's go see what we can find. It's been a long time since I've used my woodland skills, but I suspect they're still up to snuff."

"What do you mean, you just let them go?" Robert of Huntingdon demanded of Will Scarlet.

"What're you yellin' about?" Will demanded in turn. "How was I supposed to know you were lookin' for 'em? They were travellers — strange, but harmless. Except maybe for the woman," he added darkly.

"The woman carried the sword?" Robin asked wonderingly. "Herne didn't say anything about a woman."

"Herne doesn't know everything. She was definitely a woman. And it was definitely a sword."

"Well, come on, Will — we've got to find them. Before whatever it is out there finds them first."

Ian's woodland skills proved to be so far from snuff that Randi guided him to a rock and told him to stay put while she took care of dinner. After all, she was still a card-carrying member of the Sierra Club.

Dusk was beginning to settle in the darkening forest as Randi set off in search of food. It wasn't long before

she found a bush with some dried-up looking berries still clinging to the upper branches. As she stuffed her pockets with the berries, she noticed that the lower branches were denuded, not even the stubs of leaves remaining. That meant there might be small animals about, perhaps rabbits. Before she'd been bitten by a werewolf, Randi Wallace had been a confirmed vegetarian. But the wolf in her blood had transformed her into a raging carnivore, with or without the full moon. She lifted her face into the breeze and sniffed. Another advantage of her condition was vastly heightened senses, especially her sense of smell.

There! An image formed quickly in her mind's eye, and she moved off quietly through the brush. The scent led her through the forest, further and further away from the place she'd left Ian and Mason. At last she came to a small stream, chuckling its way over the rocks on the streambed. Drinking delicately at the far bank was a small deer, the shadow of its ribs outlined against its flesh. Randi crouched down on the ground, watching the deer through slitted eyes. She slid the sword out of her beltloops and laid it on the ground beside her.

She'd never had to kill her food before, and the thought sickened her. Snarfing down burgers at Micky Dee's was one thing, but killing an innocent creature ... that was an entirely different matter. Slowly, she rose, intent on leaving the streamside, when the freshening breeze carried the smell of the deer more strongly in her direction.

Suddenly, she went rigid. Then her head whipped up, her eyes rolling back in her head. A low snarl escaped her lips and her fingers flexed convulsively. As her eyes refocussed, the irises were a brilliant gold, pupils slitted. She growled softly, dropping back into a crouch. Soundlessly, she moved toward a shallow spot in the stream, downwind of the deer, and made her way across. As she stalked the deer, her canines grew longer, her hands coarser, tipped with talon-like nails. Hair sprouted on the tops of her hands and between her eyebrows. She was nearly on all fours as she moved to within a body-length of the animal.

In one massive lunge, she was tearing at the throat of the animal, impassive to its screams of anguish as its blood rushed over her. Abruptly, it fell limp, and she shook it angrily. Then she dropped it, falling into a feral crouch and lifting her head to howl triumphantly.

Bodies crashing through the undergrowth caught her attention, and she growled menacingly. Then slowly, she rose from her crouch, poised to leap at the intruders.

On the opposite bank, Ian and Mason ground to a halt, gasping. "Oh my God!" Ian breathed at the sight of Randi, half-woman, half-wolf, and drenched in blood. He started to scramble into the stream when Mason's hand shot out and grabbed his arm in an iron grip.

"Not so fast, Ian! Look at her — she'd kill you before you reached the shoreline."

Ankle-deep in water, Ian nodded soundlessly, his face a study in anguish. "Why is this happening?" he whispered. "The moon won't be full for several days —"

"Where's the sword?" Mason demanded suddenly. "She doesn't have the sword on her!"

"Wha —" Ian replied, then realized that the sword must be their ticket home. Frantically, he joined Mason in his search of the nearby ground, crowing with exultation as he leapt up, sword in hand. The moon was rising now, a gibbous moon, and a beam of moonlight hit the blade and shone across the water. The thin band of light fell across Randi's face, and suddenly she screamed, a very human and frightened scream. Ian was in the water, sword still in hand, before Mason could react.

"Oh my God! Omigod, omigod, omigod! Ian!" screeched Randi, her eyes wild yet very human in a face smooth and furless. She caught sight of her bloodied hands and screamed anew, jumping fearfully away from the steaming carcass of the deer. "Oh, my God, what's happening?"

Ian dropped the sword and wrapped his arms around her, holding on for dear life, murmuring soothing nonsense as he tried to calm her. "It's all right, Randi, we're here, it's okay. Randi, calm down! Randi, I'm here —" He suddenly shifted his arms to grasp her shoulders and shook her. "Calm down! What happened?"

Sobbing hysterically, Randi grabbed at Ian's shoulders, and the renewed sight of her hands caked in gore made her scream again. She broke away from him, plunging into the stream, desperately scrubbing away at her hands, face and neck.

"I'll start a fire," called Mason, and he moved away from the bank to gather dry wood, while Ian waded into the water after Randi.

"Randi, you can stop now — it's all gone. Randi!" he repeated, slapping her face lightly. "Calm down. Tell me what happened," he commanded forcefully, leading her back onto the bank.

Gulping spasmodically, Randi nodded slowly, her eyes still wide with fear. "I ... I found a bush," she began. "It looked like animals had been at it." He smiled encouragingly. Closing her eyes briefly, she nodded again. Opening them, she continued, "I caught the scent of something on the wind, I started to follow it, and I found the deer, here, drinking from the stream —" Her mouth worked soundlessly, eyes glittering with terror.

"And then?" Ian prodded, holding her arms at her sides at arms' length.

"And then ..." she shook her head. "I can't remember anything until I saw you and the ... the blood! Oh, my God, Ian, I'm not safe, I can transform at any moment, you've got to get away —"

"Why did you drop the sword?" he asked quietly.

"The sword? Who cares about the sword —" she demanded, puzzled and suddenly angry.

"The sword has something to do with this, Randi. You started to change back at the site, when you were under its spell. And now, you changed when you dropped the sword, and yet light reflected off of it seemed to change you back. The sword is *very* important, Randi," he pointed out solemnly. "Promise me you won't set it down again."

With a shuddering breath, Randi nodded. "Okay. Okay, I won't. But what are we going to do, Ian? What if I —"

"You won't. Hold onto the sword. It's magic, remember? Believe me, Randi, I won't let anything happen to you again," he added, pulling her into an embrace, and pressing her head against his chest. Stroking her hair, he whispered, "I won't let anything happen to you."

The crackling of breaking branches heralded Mason's return. "Ah. Help me start the fire, will you?" he asked mundanely.

"What was that?" demanded Scarlet in a whisper as he and Robin slipped quietly through the wood.

"Over there!" Robin exclaimed softly, and together the two men set off toward the sound of a woman screaming.

"No. I won't."

"Randi, you've got to eat," Ian pointed out pragmatically.

"No. Not *that*," she countered with a shudder of revulsion. She huddled close to the fire, shivering with cold. The sword sat across her feet, glinting in the firelight.

Mason had pulled out Carlson's Swiss Army knife and sliced off sections from the deer's flank, deftly cutting away the soft hide. Chunks of deer meat sizzled and spat over the cheerful fire, filling the air with the tantalizing scent of roasting meat. Ian looked from the makeshift spit to Randi and furrowed his brow with concern. "What then?"

She dug in her pockets and pulled out a fistful of berries, shoving them in her mouth defiantly. Her face screwed up at the sour taste, but resolutely, she continued to chew, staring Ian down. He shrugged, and turned away.

"That's the King's deer you're roasting, friend. A forester would have your hands for that," came a soft, cultured voice from out of the night.

"What? Who's there?" demanded Ian, leaping to his feet.

"Lucky for you, a friend," answered the voice, and a young man, blond, tanned, clean-shaven and barely in his mid-twenties, stepped into the light of the fire. A few feet away, Will Scarlet moved into view.

Mason scrambled to his feet, while Randi continued to sit miserably on the ground. She looked up at the strangers, scowling.

"Looks like you never found that alehouse," Scarlet commented wryly.

"Ah, no," agreed Mason. "Who is your friend?" he asked, nodding toward the blond-haired man.

"This here's Robin Hood," Scarlet replied, hooking a thumb in Robin's direction.

So this was the mythical Robin Hood. Not so mythical, apparently. His eyes swept over the trio,

lingering on the sword. He lifted his eyes to look Randi squarely in the face. "You carry a great sword. What is its name?"

Randi frowned a moment, then realized that he meant that the sword had greatness, not that it was nifty. "Ulfhel," she replied.

"The work of Wayland."

"Yes. How did you know — "

"I carry Albion. One of the seven swords of Wayland," he replied, his hand straying to the sword's hilt. "I've never heard of Ulfhel, but Herne told me another of Wayland's swords was here in Sherwood." He turned to the two men. "You've come far. Join us — there'll be food and drink at our camp."

"The deer —" Mason began.

"Leave it. There are wolves out tonight, and it will attract them. You're safer without it."

Randi nodded wretchedly and struggled to her feet. "Are there always wolves in the forest?" she asked softly.

Robin Hood shook his head. "There are more this year. I think, perhaps, that is why you are here."

The pack ran free this night, wanton and wild in the forest. Tomorrow, the villages would talk of sheep killed, cattle stolen, the elderly and the infirm lost to the marauding wolves. Tomorrow, fences would be mended, palings erected, and byres closed down as livestock was brought closer to the huts and rude houses of the peasants. But tonight the pack ran free.

He sat upon the abbot's throne and regarded the stars shining clearly in the night sky. Be patient, my Lord, he thought. The pack runs free, and it is growing.

"Ian," Ian introduced, then cleared his throat. "Ian Matheson. And this is Randi Wallace, and Professor John Mason," he added, gesturing toward his companions.

"Welcome to Sherwood, Ian Matheson, Randi Wallace and John Mason. A professor, eh? And what faith do you profess, John Mason?" asked Robin mildly as he led the way through the trees.

"I, er, what?" Mason replied. "The faith of the mind, of course. I am a professor of mythology at Oxford University," he added.

"Ah. Then it's Master Mason. You'll find few who speak Latin here in Sherwood, although I know a bit from my tutors."

"Tutors?" Randi asked. "In the forest?"

Robin smiled. "I didn't always live in the forest. I was the only son of the Earl of Huntingdon until the King branded me wolfshead." A shadow of pain flitted across his smooth face, just as Randi's eyes widened at the term 'wolfshead'.

"I'm sorry," Randi said gently, falling in step beside the young man.

"It's a long time ago, now," he agreed.

"Then would you mind telling me what a 'wolfshead' is?"

The camp of the outlaws was deep in Sherwood, and after introductions were made, the renegades and their guests helped themselves to the pot. The friar, Tuck, had been in charge of the meal again, and the pot was full of meat, tubers, and forest mushrooms. Thick, hot and pungent, the stew filled the weary travellers quickly. Tuck made suggestive motions toward the mead keg, and Robin approved, smiling. With a clap of pleasure, Tuck broke the seal on the keg and started pouring mugs of mead. It didn't take long for Ian, Randi and Mason to feel the effects of the potent brew.

"Wow," Randi breathed, sipping at the drink. "This stuff is great! Better'n anything I've had at a Ren Faire."

Tuck beamed. "The beekeepers in Sherwood make a fine brew."

"And they're willing enough to let us have a keg or two in exchange for a little help now and again," Will agreed, pulling on his mug.

The Saracen, Nasir, shook his head when Randi glanced his way. "Against his religion," Tuck scoffed. "What God provides, we imbibe!"

"Easy, Tuck. It's your turn on watch tonight," Robin reminded, chuckling.

"You have to keep watch, this deep in the forest?" Ian asked around a mouthful of stew.

"There's wolves about," John pointed out seriously. "Edward said he's lost more sheep just this week."

Randi looked at Ian, who nodded once, then nudged her to pay attention.

"Edward's headman in Wickham. And a good friend," Robin explained.

"Aye," Will agreed. "Wolves — more of 'em since last fall. What's bringin' 'em down toward the villages?"

"Mmm. The winter wasn't as hard as some we've had — yet the wolves are coming closer and closer to the villages," added Tuck. "Over in Chalford, the villagers have pulled the flocks back to within sight of the barns."

"Robin, you don't — it couldn't be them Sons of Fenris, now, could it?" Much asked worriedly.

Robin shook his head. "No. Gulnar is dead. The Sons of Fenris are gone." There was something in his tone of voice that made his companions sit up straighter and pay closer attention to him.

"But?" Tuck prompted.

"But Herne warns that the Time of the Wolf may not be over. That another is coming to the forest, another who wants to raise Fenris."

Randi gasped, glancing over at Ulfhel. "Fenris."

"The Norse wolf god," Mason interjected. "Supposed to reenter the world at Ragnarok. The herald of chaos."

Robin nodded slowly. "And mortal enemy of Herne."

"Herne?" Ian asked. He'd heard of Herne the Hunter, the ghost who was supposed to haunt Windsor Forest, but they were far from there, and these men acted as though they were on intimate terms with this 'Herne.'

"Lord of the Trees, the god of the forest," Robin explained. "He called to me, ordered me to come to the forest when Robin of Loxley — the original Robin Hood — was killed. The villagers call me 'Herne's Son'."

"I'd say it's all pagan nonsense, but I've met 'im," Tuck put in. "I've seen what he can do. And it gives the villagers hope to have someone who is Herne's son. Makes the church fathers mad as fighting cocks, but hope's a precious thing hereabouts."

A god. Randi reached over and squeezed Ian's hand. Yes, hope's a precious thing.

The howls of distant wolves carried on the night breeze, filling the clearing with the chilling sound. Robin made one last circuit of the camp, nodding amiably at Tuck, who sat with his back to a large tree facing out into the night, a staff resting across his updrawn knees. Eyes darting fearfully, Much pulled his brychan closer and hunkered down to sleep, smiling at the sight of Robin. John was already asleep, snoring softly. Will rolled over and pulled his dagger from its pouch, slipped it up his sleeve, then rolled over again. Nasir saluted his leader with the curved blade of his knife, and settled back slowly into the roots of an ancient oak, crossing his arms over his chest, the blade held firmly in his right hand.

Satisfied that the camp was secure, Robin returned to the fire, carefully placing flat rocks around the perimeter to bank the blaze. He glanced over at the trio of strangers and shook his head. So odd, these travellers. Their dress, their manner of speech. A woman with one of Wayland's swords. Even here, he could feel the pulse of its power. Attuned to Albion, he would know if any of Wayland's swords was nearby, but this one sang a strange tune, almost an excited wail. This sword had a purpose, he knew, and it was more than the purpose of Herne. The woman, Randi, lay curled on the ground, several feet away from the man named Ian. In her arms was cradled the sword. Not once since he'd found them had she let go of the sword. A magic talisman? Albion had great power, he knew. More than once he had felt the fey strength of the sword working through him, and more than once it had protected him, though it had been wielded by another. "Herne's son is my master. I cannot slay him." So said the runes inscribed in its blade. Albion's power he knew and trusted. But Ulfhel? This was a wild sword, an unknown.

Wulfring stood inside the massive doors, awaiting his children. A motley band of men and women, wild-eyed, naked, caked in dirt and detritus, straggled in, their joy expressed in exultant cries and laughter.

"Good hunting, my children?" he asked, smiling.

"Aye, my lord," answered the man at the head of the group. "'Tis a plentiful land. We fed well this night."

"And what have you brought me?" Wulfring inquired, nodding toward the milling crowd.

With a laugh, the leader reached into the group and pulled out a man, bound and gagged and struggling fiercely to break his bonds. "A villager, my lord. A strong man, he nearly cut the ear off Daniel." He poked at the man's tethered arms. "A fine man, sir."

Wulfring laughed, a pealing, ebullient sound. "Excellent, my son. You have done well. Leave him to me and take your rest, all of you. Our master will be pleased with your offering."

As his followers dispersed, a man and a woman came up to him and laid at his feet the carcass of a deer and a barrel of grain. Bowing to him, they passed by and rejoined their comrades who were quickly disappearing into the labyrinth of Grimstone Abbey.

In the deafening silence that followed their departure, Wulfring stood a moment regarding the captive. Then he stepped up to the man and removed his gag. "You have a name."

The man spat in Wulfring face, his face rigid with defiance.

Slowly, Wulfring wiped the spittle from his face, never taking his eyes off the man. "Ah. There's fire in your belly, villager. All the better. My master has no use for lambs."

"To hell with your master," the man cursed. "Robin Hood'll set you right."

"The Hooded Man, eh? Herne's Son. You believe in the man-god, do you? You believe that he will save you?"

"Herne looks after his own," agreed the man, undaunted.

As rapid as a striking serpent, Wulfring's hand shot out and grabbed the man by his hair, yanking back forcefully. "I'll have your name, man."

Gasping from the pain, the man whispered, "Edward. Edward of Wickham."

"Robin!" a small voice called urgently. "Robin Hood!"

Tuck roused himself immediately from his light dose, wrenching his bulk into a standing position. "Who's there?" he called out.

"It's me, Tuck, it's Matthew!" the voice answered, and a small boy, no more than ten, stepped out from behind a tree.

"Matthew! What are you doing out so late?"

"It's my father, Tuck. My father's been taken by wolves!"

The scene at Wickham was chaotic, panic-stricken. Alison, Edward's wife, was hysterical, tearing at her hair and beating her breasts in time to her sobs and moans.

Breathless from running, Robin, his men, Matthew, and the three travellers stumbled across the bridge into the center of the village in the light of flickering torches, pushing their way through the tightly-knotted villagers.

"Alison!" Robin cried, reaching for the maddened woman. She fought him off with clenched fists, wailing. Tuck held Matthew close, his hands on the boy's shoulders.

"Here, let me," Randi offered, shouldering Robin aside. With the flat of her hand, she slapped Alison's face, eliciting a surprised yelp from the villagewoman, then grabbed her in an iron-bound hug Alison could not escape. "Shh! Shhh," she hushed softly. "Calm down — you can't help Edward if you can't tell us what happened."

Alison's tear-streaked face suddenly calmed, her eyes wide. She rubbed absently at the mark left by Randi's hand, and stared at the woman holding her still. "Who are you?" she asked suddenly.

"Friends. We're friends of Robin Hood," Randi replied, glancing over at Robin for support. The outlaw leader nodded approval. "And we'll do what we can to get Edward back, but you've got to tell us what happened. Okay?"

Alison nodded, gulping back her sobs. "Yes."

"Good." Randi let go of Alison and looked over the woman's shoulder at the other villagers. "Can someone get her some water?" At her request, one of

the other women scurried off to get a ladle-full of water from the well. She brought it over to Alison and helped her drink. Patting her arm reassuringly, Randi asked Alison, "Are you ready now?"

"Yes, thank you," she replied, handing the ladle back to her neighbor.

Gently, Randi led Alison to join the outlaw band, her arm draped protectively around Alison's shoulders. Robin reached out and grasped her hand, squeezing it sympathetically. The villagers followed silently, clustering around them.

"What can you tell us, Alison?" he asked softly.

The woman closed her eyes for a moment, drawing a deep breath to steady her nerves, and nodded. "You know there've been wolves again this spring," she began. The others nodded encouragement. "Edward was out in the fields with the other men, bringing the livestock closer to the village. We've already lost ... oh, five or six sheep, another three goats, and a cow was brought down the other night." The villagers signaled their assent. "There've been stories ... anyway, Edward was out, and he and the other men were coming down from the pastureland with what's left of our sheep and cattle and goats. Then suddenly ..." she broke off in a sob.

"We heard the wolves," put in Granther Miller, an elderly man who'd once operated a mill near Wickham. "Comin' down from the hills, they were, fast. A whole pack!"

"Yes," agreed Alison. "A whole pack. The men started walking faster, pushing the animals ahead of them ..."

"And the wolves broke out of the forest," added another man, about Edward's age, named David.

"Only they wasn't any kind of wolf I've ever seen," interjected another, this one named Michael Smith, the village smith. "These wolves ran on two feet!" he appended with a shiver.

"What do you mean, Michael?" Robin asked. "Sons of Fenris — we killed them all —"

"Nay. These weren't men wearing wolfskins. These were wolves on two feet, like men. But they weren't no men," Michael warned ominously.

"Wolves. On two feet," repeated Randi, glancing at Ian. "What did they look like?"

"Tall, tall as John there. Fur all over. Long snouts — vicious teeth. Wild eyes. They howled like banshees."

Alison sobbed again, twisting her skirt in her hands. "The men were almost to the village ..." Here she broke down again, and Randi tightened her grip on the woman's shoulders.

"The biggest of 'em, a brute he was, broke from the pack and made straight for Edward. A couple more, they went for poor Hugh."

"What happened to Hugh?"

Michael shuddered. "They brought 'im down, like a dog. We couldn't save 'im," he added, shaking his head sadly.

"Where is he?" Ian asked suddenly. Michael shrugged toward a hut at the edge of the village. "I'm going to go have a look," he told Randi.

"Hope you have a strong stomach, stranger. There ain't much left of 'im."

"What happened to Edward?" Robin pressed.

"They took 'im. The big one and two others closed in on 'im and took 'im. Then they ran for the forest faster'n the hounds of hell."

"Was Edward alive? Well?" Robin demanded urgently.

Michael looked at Alison for a long moment before replying. "Yes. I'm fair sure he was still alive. Knocked out, maybe, but alive."

"Then we'll find him," Robin announced with a confidence he didn't quite feel. He laid his hand over Alison's wrist and squeezed. "We'll find him, Alison."

"Blessed be, son of Herne," Alison breathed, her eyes shining. "If you say you'll find him, I know he'll be home soon."

As always, Robin found the unshakable belief of some of the villagers unnerving. Alison, like many others, truly believed that he had powers beyond mortal ken. Silently, he prayed that he could fulfill his promise; Edward was a good friend, and leader of these people. Without him, they were already lost.

"Randi, Professor!" Ian called from the hut where Hugh's remains were laid. "Come look at this."

With another hug, Randi released Alison, and joined Mason and Ian at the hut's entrance. They followed Ian inside, where the corpse of Hugh was dimly lit by a torch. Ian picked up the torch and brought it closer to the body. "What do you think?" he asked.

Hugh's throat had been torn out, the trachea severed, and the neck laid open to the spinal column. Flaps of ragged flesh hung away from the wound. Mason bent over to examine it more closely. "Yes, definitely a massive paw of some kind — look at the entry wounds — those are definitely nails, razor sharp." He touched the injury tentatively, splaying his fingers over it. "About the size of a man's hand, perhaps a bit bigger," he pronounced.

Randi was staring at her own hands, eyes wide with fear. She refused to look at the body of the unlucky Hugh. Ian laid a hand on her shoulder and said, "It wasn't you. It couldn't have been you."

"How do you know? I could have changed while you were sleeping —"

Ian shook his head. "No," he told her gently. "I never really fell asleep. And Tuck was on guard. Someone in the camp would have seen you. It wasn't you."

She let go of a pent-up breath and relaxed slightly. "Thanks. But who?"

"Or what?" Mason countered.

"No. Who," Randi replied. "Those wounds were made by a werewolf."

"And it sounds as though there's a pack of them loose in Sherwood," Ian commented. He looked pointedly at Randi's sword. "I think perhaps we've found what it wants."

Randi's hand strayed to the hilt of Ulfhel, now suspended at her hip in a leather scabbard Robin Hood had given her. She raised her eyes to lock with Ian's, her face grim.

Michael led the outlaws and their friends to the site of the strange battle with the man-wolves. Nasir dropped to his knees, examining the hard ground. Randi walked around warily, sniffing the air. Suddenly, she started moving toward the edge of the forest.

"Randi!" Ian called. "Don't go on alone!"

"They went this way, Ian," she replied, and the Saracen stood and nodded.

"She is right," he said simply and followed her.

Shaking Michael's hand, Robin signalled for the others to follow Randi and Nasir.

Edward of Wickham shivered uncontrollably. It wasn't the cold; a byre burned cheerfully nearby, bathing his sweating body in heat. It wasn't any fever he'd ever known. But his body shuddered and convulsed under the onslaught of a pain greater than anything he had ever experienced. His blood burned, searing every nerve ending. A slow trickle escaped the gash in his neck, the gash made by Wulfring.

He was shackled to a pillar in the chapel of Grimstone Abbey, the same pillar that had once held Robin Hood Gulnar's captive. Leaning against the altar, Wulfring watched Edward's suffering with alert interest.

"Eventually, the pain passes. It is but a moment," he observed, waving his hand, dismissing the man's agony. "Then you will begin to see the world through new eyes. Stronger, better eyes."

Edward raised his head and looked at Wulfring, his eyes a brilliant gold, his pupils slitted, and growled.

"Recognize the path, Robin?" John asked quietly as he and the others followed the rapid pace set by Randi and Nasir. The sun was rising to the east, filtering through the burgeoning trees like liquid gold. Birds chirruped their greeting to the day, and the woods were filled with the sounds of wildlife.

Robin nodded once. "The path to Grimstone Abbey," he agreed.

"Aye," the big man assented. "Grimstone Abbey." It was a name full of portent, a harbinger of doom. Despite the growing warmth of the day, John Little shivered.

At the head of the column, Randi and the Saracen, Nasir, continued to follow their own senses: Nasir, his eyes, ears and nose, Randi primarily her nose. She could smell the wolves — the werewolves — and mixed within the scent, the very human smell of fear. She kept that fact to herself; whatever the pack had planned for Edward

of Wickham, it had terrified the man sufficiently to send off olfactory alarms.

As she marched next to the Saracen, she was shocked to realize how quickly she'd come to accept this strange world of the past, how quickly they'd come to accept her. She was as alien to this land as the Arab walking beside her, a woman with a sword. A woman wearing trousers, for that matter, and one who was in no way submissive. And just how could she, Ian and Professor Mason understand these people? She hadn't thought of it before, but surely they must speak an archaic form of English, and yet, there had been no difficulty in understanding them, or making themselves understood to the people of this time. Not for the first time, her hand closed reflexively around the hilt of Ulfhel, their ticket here, and hopefully their passport home. She could only assume that the sword's magic had extended to provide them the keys to communicate in this faraway time.

She glanced over at Nasir, taking an opportunity to study him. His swarthy face was impassive, the dark eyes constantly scanning the thick undergrowth and surrounding trees. She couldn't remember any mention of a Saracen in the Robin Hood ballads collected by Childe, but then again, they'd probably been written by Christians who'd balked at the idea of an infidel hero. So, Kevin Costner got it right, even if he hadn't had the right name.

"Wait," Nasir said abruptly, his arm suddenly blocking her path.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

"Listen."

She strained to hear the sounds that the man had picked up, trying to filter the familiar sounds of the forest away. There it was. Movement. Voices. Human voices.

Quietly, the others moved up behind them, Robin sending a silent query to Nasir.

"Voices, up ahead," the Saracen replied simply. "Stay here." Silently, he moved away from the column, into the artificial twilight of the close-set trees.

"He shouldn't go out there alone —" Randi started to protest.

"Nasir can take care of himself," Robin chided with a faint smile.

Crouching low to the ground, Nasir moved swiftly through the undergrowth toward the sound of the voices. As he came nearer, he could begin to make out words, but the tongue was alien to him. Guttural, harsh. Over the years, he'd become accustomed to the inelegant language of the people here in these cold islands, but this language was the language of the Northern peoples.

He edged closer, screened by the interlacing branches of low-growing bushes. He could see them now, a small group of strangely-dressed men, blithely gathering firewood and shoving and punching each other with good-natured abandon. As he inched a little further into the bushes, he saw one of the men suddenly look up, and gasped at the sight of the man's weird eyes. They were golden, with slitted pupils. And the smile the man directed toward Nasir's hiding place was feral and fanged.

Waiting anxiously where Nasir had left them, the outlaws and their companions heard the cry carry clearly. Immediately, hands shot to the hilts of weapons, and as one, they dropped to a crouch, poised for flight.

"Nasir!" Robin hissed, glancing at Scarlet. Scarlet nodded and moved off swiftly toward the source of the cry. A look toward John, and the big man was off, silent for all his bulk. "Stay here," Robin commanded, but Randi shook her head.

"This thing's gotta be good for something," she replied, slipping the sword free of the scabbard.

Robin spared a glance at the sword grasped in her hand and nodded, freeing Albion. "All right. With me, then."

Taking a deep breath, Randi nodded, and followed the outlaw leader as he sped through the trees.

Tuck, Much, Ian and Professor Mason remained where they were, straining to see where the others had gone.

"It'll be all right," Tuck assured. "Robin'll sort them out." Ian looked at him, unsure whether the friar had spoken for their benefit, or his own.

Robin and Randi burst into the clearing in sight of a bizarre melee. Nasir was struggling in the grasp of a weird beast, a wolf that stood on two feet, blood running freely from scratches and wounds on his exposed arms

and face. John was battling another, buffeting the beast with his staff. Scarlet was circling round with yet another man-wolf, feinting with his dagger. A fourth was making its way up onto a rock ledge, poising itself to leap upon the unsuspecting outlaw's back.

"Will! Look out!" Robin called, racing across the clearing, Albion held ready. As the wolf sprang, Robin brought Albion around in a killing arc, slicing through the torso of the beast, severing its spine. With a whimper, it fell upon the ground, convulsing. He turned toward the beast edging off with Nasir in its grasp while Scarlet pressed on against his opponent.

Yet another man-wolf broke cover from the surrounding trees, pelting toward John; Randi sprinted toward it, lifting Ulfhel clumsily. Although she'd done some fencing while in England, it hadn't prepared her for the weight and length of the ancient sword. She overcompensated, and the force of her intended blow sent her somersaulting to the ground. Quickly she reoriented herself, but the wolfman was already clawing at John's face, clinging to the man's back with fierce determination. His staff was knocked from his hands, and the creature he'd been fending off crouched low, snarling, and lunged at the man's midsection.

Scrambling to her feet, Randi made a running leap toward the first man-wolf, swinging Ulfhel wildly. She connected, feeling the crunch of bone resisting the blade, then the sickly collapse of its ribcage as the sword bit deep into its side. Blood ran down the blade to cover her hand as the man-wolf bellowed its rage, releasing its hold on John and stumbling toward her. She faltered back a step, watching in horror as the man-beast clutched its side, its weird eyes fixed on her as blood dripped from its maw. Then the golden color faded from the eyes, replaced by a brilliant blue, and the muzzle of the wolf smoothed itself out into the face of a man. With a sigh, the man crumpled to the ground and didn't move again.

Meanwhile, John had managed to flip the wolf off his back and retrieve his staff, and now circled around in a parody of court dance with the beast. Little slammed the end of the staff against the beast's head, sending it sprawling on its back. Seeing her opportunity, Randi rushed in with the sword, its hilt slick in her blood-coated hands, and drove the blade into the beast's chest. With a wracking cough, the beast shuddered, its limbs flailing as if in seizure, then fell still. Randi wrenched the sword free with a grunt and looked up at John. He clapped her on the shoulder, nearly knocking her down, and spun off toward Scarlet.

Scarlet had managed to wound the beast, and blood ran down its pelt in numerous places. But Scarlet had not escaped unscathed, and blood seeped through his tunic and down his breeches as he struggled to hold his own against the creature. Of Robin, Nasir, and the beast which had captured him, there was no sign. John waded in to set the odds more to their favor while Randi darted off in search of Robin.

She found him perched at the top of a small promontory overlooking a valley that led up to a massive stone structure. He was pressed against the ground, looking through the scrawny bushes lining the ridge. Albion was sheathed once more, but streaks of blood on its hilt and scabbard indicated the sword had seen more use before he'd put it away. He looked up as Randi dropped down beside him.

"Will and John?" he asked urgently.

"They'll be here in a minute. They're just finishing up." She wiped the hilt of her sword on her jeans and squirmed around so she could slide it back into the scabbard. "What about Nasir?"

Robin shook his head. "Whatever that thing is, it moves fast. I couldn't keep up." He pointed to the valley, where the beast had broken cover and now made its way up the bridge to the building, Nasir still held in its grasp. From here, it looked as though the Saracen was unconscious, limp in the beast's arms and offering no resistance. The great doors to the fortress opened, and the beast slipped inside with its burden. Robin exhaled violently.

"What is that place?" Randi queried softly.

"Grimstone Abbey," he replied. "It was once a Benedictine abbey. Then the Sons of Fenris took it over."

"And now?"

"Now it looks like something worse has come to Sherwood."

When the outlaws had joined Robin and Randi, he sent Randi back in search of the others. Twenty minutes later, Randi arrived, leading Tuck, Much, Ian and the Professor. Randi set about looking after Will's wounds while Robin filled them in all in on the situation as he saw it. Tuck saw to John's injuries.

"I don't know what these things are, but they can be killed."

"We saw the bodies as we came through. They weren't wolves anymore. They were men," Tuck agreed.

"They're werewolves," Ian put in grimly.

"Werewolves?" Robin repeated, puzzled.

"Men who can turn into wolves, wolves which walk like men." He glanced over at Randi, who nodded encouragingly. "But I've never seen werewolves like this — men who change in the daylight, without the full moon. These werewolves seem to change at will."

"Where do they come from?" John asked.

Ian shook his head. "I don't know. We ... we've been searching for the secret," he added, expelling a sigh. "Where we come from, it is a curse. But these creatures ..." He shook his head again.

"Well, they die like any other creature. They're harder to kill, but they die. And if they're magic, then we may need Herne's help."

"Ah, Galen. Another one. You've done well, my son," Wulfring congratulated as his follower deposited Nasir's unconscious body at his feet.

"Not so well, my lord," replied Galen. "The others ... they are dead. Strangers with swords and weapons — the others are all dead, my lord."

Wulfring frowned, turning away to digest this unfortunate news. Then he turned back. "Then we must replace their numbers. We cannot afford to reduce our community. These strangers — what did they look like?"

"A man, very tall, bearded. He fought with a staff, very good he was. Another man, perhaps an ex-soldier, ordinary-looking, but good with a knife. A third man, blond, aristocratic-looking. He wielded a sword of great power, my lord. I could feel it. And a woman — dressed like a man, she was. And she, too, carried a great sword. She felt ... familiar, somehow, my lord," he added, puzzled.

"Familiar, eh? Hmm. This blond man, the one with the great sword. Could he be Herne's Son, I wonder?" Wulfring was silent for a moment, considering the facts as presented. "Follow them. They will not attack the Abbey in such small numbers. But they just might lead us to Herne. I want the Hunter. Gather some of the men, arm yourselves. And bring any survivors back here. We must replace those we have lost."

The man bowed and left the Abbey front hall, leaving Wulfring to ponder the unconscious man at his feet. "A Saracen. Why so far from home, my friend, eh? No matter. Soon all the world will be your home." Bending, he lifted the man as though he were no heavier than a small sack of grain, and carried him back toward the chapel.

It was dark by the time they reached their camp, and Will and John were both limping from their injuries. Robin was sick at heart at the loss of Nasir, but he'd kept telling the others that they would get him back. To himself, he wasn't so sure.

There wouldn't be much rest for his band this night, he knew. They'd have to double-up on their watch to prevent any of the man-beasts — the werewolves, as Ian called them — from getting to the camp. While there'd been no sign of pursuit, he was sure that the creatures would follow.

As to his next step, they would have to enlist the aid of the men of Wickham in storming the Abbey. It was more than his small group could accomplish alone, even with the added advantage of the sword the woman Randi carried. She wasn't expert with the sword; he'd seen that before he'd gone off in pursuit of Nasir's captor. They couldn't afford to trust to her achieving a lucky blow or two to turn the tide in their favor. And the two men, Ian and Master Mason — they were untried in battle. He didn't even know if either could handle a sword or staff. But it was too dangerous to send anyone to the village in the dark; that would have to wait until morning, when they'd have the advantage of light. What could not wait was a conference with Herne.

As Tuck set about preparing their evening meal, Robin walked over to the two outlander men. "We'll have to attack the Abbey, and soon. Are either of you trained in combat?"

The question didn't surprise either man, but neither was quick to claim battle skills. At last, Ian spoke up, "Nothing in real battle. I've had some training in, ah, hand-to-hand, a little fencing. But I learn quickly."

"Will can help you. He was a soldier, and he's very good in close quarters. And try to remember anything you can think of that might help us with these creatures. Any advantage will be welcome. And you, Master Mason?"

"Sorry, no. But like Ian, I learn quickly."

Robin clapped them each on the shoulder and nodded. "Then you both should eat and get some rest now, and later you can work with Will and John. Then get some sleep — you'll each have to take a watch tonight — we'll need at least two men for each watch."

Both men nodded agreement and moved off. Robin went over to speak with Will.

"How're you feeling?" he asked gently.

Will shrugged. "I've been better. But I'll heal. What's up with them?" he inquired, nodding toward the two strangers.

"Just trying to find out what good they'll be in a fight. I want you to work with them, you and John. We need every man we can get, but I don't want them going in unprepared."

Will nodded and Robin smiled. Will seemed to have learned his lesson about "civilians" when they'd battled the Sons of Fenris with the aid of the men of Wickham. Both men seemed fit, although Mason was thin and a little sickly-looking — no worse than any villager, really. "Good."

"What about you?" Will added.

"I'm going to see Herne. He might have more information for us, maybe some ideas of what we can do to protect ourselves."

Will nodded slowly. The Hunter had been looking over them all for several years now, and he trusted him. Over time, he'd come to understand that the death of Robin of Loxley had somehow been necessary, and had Herne been able to stop it, he would have. If Herne was able to give them aid, he would. If not, then they were on their own.

Will grasped Robin's hand and squeezed it. "We'll get Edward and Nasir back. You'll see."

"I know, Will. I know."

Next, Robin made his way to join Randi, who was carefully cleaning away the encrusted blood on her sword. She looked up expectantly.

"I'm going to speak with Herne. I want you to come with me."

"Herne? Why?"

"He warned me of these creatures, and he told me to expect you. He said that together, we could defeat the Wolf. You carry a sword forged by Wayland, as I do. I think Herne may be able to tell us more, and I think you should be there to hear it."

Randi studied the young man's face, then slowly inclined her head in acknowledgement. "When?"

"Now."

Galen, flanked by a trio of hand-picked men, hovered just beyond the range of mortal hearing from the camp of the outlaws, downwind and beyond sight. Like his fellows, his senses were greater than those of normal men, and the voices from the camp carried clearly to his ears. He heard the outlaw leader speak of Herne, and he smiled. His master had been right. With a flick of his wrist, he signalled for the others to come closer, and caught the scent of the man and the woman on the breeze. They were leaving the camp, making their way to the man-god's hideaway.

In the chapel of Grimstone Abbey, Edward of Wickham still stood shackled to the pillar, although one of Wulfring's followers held a bowl of stew up for him to eat. At first, he'd refused food, but when he'd seen Nasir carried in and manacled to another pillar, he'd known that Robin Hood and his men could not be far. There was a chance he might yet escape, and he needed his strength so he would not be a burden to the Hooded Man. With that in mind, he relented, and accepted the food offered to him. The chains on the manacles were long enough so that he could feed himself, so he took the bowl and ate while the man watched.

The broth of the stew was hot, but the meat was cold, raw, bloody. He found himself ravenous, gulping down chunks of the meat without chewing. The pain had passed hours ago, but his body felt strange, alien. The raw meat fueled that strangeness, making him feel giddy, yet at the same time, stronger. He glanced over at Nasir, who hung unconscious from the shackles of the pillar. Then he noticed a slight movement from the

Saracen, and Nasir opened one eye, frowning slightly to indicate that Edward should remain silent. With an imperceptible nod, Edward agreed, and returned his attention to the food.

Robin reached out his hand, and helped Randi down into the boat. It rocked gently, but she found her footing and sat down in the stern. Robin seated himself at the bow and poled the boat away from shore. A heavy mist had risen on the water, swirling around them as they moved quietly toward the opposite bank. The moon hung high in the sky, only a thin crescent away from full. The full moon was two days hence. Randi shivered, staring at the moon, but Robin's attention was fastened on bringing the boat in safely in the muffling fog.

Mooring the boat, he jumped onto the shore, and Randi followed. Then they made their way up the embankment toward Herne's cave.

The Hunter was waiting for them, imposing in his antlered headdress and deerskin cape. He bent low and reentered the cave, followed by the Hooded Man and the strange woman who carried one of Wayland's swords.

The interior of the cave was warmed by the fire from the fire pit, and scented with the smell of strange herbs. As they entered, Herne turned and handed each a rude cup full of steaming liquid. "Drink," he commanded them.

Glancing at Robin, Randi did as she was told. Robin drained the cup and handed it back to Herne. She followed suit.

"Sit."

Looking around for a chair, Randi shrugged and seated herself on a rock; Robin settled next to her. Both sat quietly, waiting for the man-god to speak.

"You each carry swords fashioned by Wayland, and your destinies are intertwined. You need each other if you are to survive. You need each other if Fenris is to be kept at bay."

Robin nodded. Randi did, too. Nothing surprising so far.

Herne looked at Randi, studying her for a long time. Then he spoke, "You come from a land far away, yet very near. Your destiny was written long ago. The sword you carry has waited for you century upon century until you came to claim it. All that has happened to you was meant to be. You are the chosen of Ulfhel, you are the wolf-death."

"Why? Why me?" she demanded.

Herne spread his hands, shaking his head. "The whims of the old gods are beyond even me," he replied.

"The wolves at Grimstone Abbey," began Robin. "They are men and beasts as one. What can we do to stop them?"

Herne shook his head. "They are the children of Wulfring, the sorcerer. The Father Wolf. He has walked this earth for more than a thousand years, plotting for the freedom of Fenris. He is the key. Without him, the Children of the Wolf will not flourish."

"But how do we stop him?" asked Randi.

Herne looked at the sword belted at her side. "The sword will set you free."

Randi sat back, mouth open. "My sword. Not Albion. Not Robin's sword."

"The sword will set you free," Herne repeated. He sighed heavily. "The time is almost upon you. The pack runs. The Wolf is the hunter. The hunter becomes the wolf." He stared directly into Randi's eyes. "Wolf against Wolf. The past sets the future, the future decides the past." Abruptly, he stood. "Go, now. Gather your men. Silver is the bane of the wolf — silver will kill when blades will not. Now go."

Back in the boat, Randi was silent as Robin shoved away from shore. Out on the water, Robin swore. "Riddles! Always riddles!"

Randi looked out over the fog-enshrouded water and asked, "Have you any silver?"

Robin nodded. "Coins, jewelry, plate — there's silver in the chests at the camp. We were going to pass it out among the villages. Not any use in combat. Why?"

"One of the ways to kill a werewolf is with a silver bullet."

"What is a 'bullet'?"

Randi shook her head. Technology ahead of its time. "Then arrows. Tip the arrows in silver."

Robin considered this for a moment, then nodded. "We could melt down some of the coins, coat the arrow heads in silver. But the arrows might not be as accurate —"

"They'll be more deadly. 'Silver will kill when blades will not', remember? Do you have any weapons made of silver?"

The boat thudded up against the bank. Robin got out and tethered it to its mooring while Randi got out of the boat. "A dagger. Maybe two. We took them from some rich Norman lords. They're decorative —"

"They could be the difference," Randi replied seriously. "We've got to get all the silver together we can. If something can be used as a weapon, use it. It's our only hope, Robin."

He stared at her for a long moment, searching her face. Then he nodded. "Let's get back to camp."

They stood still as stone as the woman and man passed by, and again Galen was struck by the chord of familiarity the woman aroused in him. He shook off the sensation, listening carefully for sounds of doubling back. Finally, the wood fell silent, except for the usual night sounds, and he signalled his companions forward. At the water's edge, they found the boat, and Galen assessed that it could carry only two of them. Two of them to capture a god. It would have to do.

"A god, you say? Fascinating," John Mason observed after listening to Randi's tale of her visit with Herne. The trio of time travellers was standing watch on the outlaw camp, while the others slept. "I've never heard of legends of a Herne god in Sherwood. I shall have to do more research when we get back to our own time." He returned his attention to the work at hand, fashioning silver arrowheads for the outlaws' arrows. On Robin and Randi's return, he had volunteered to oversee the project, since, as he had admitted, he'd dabbled in metal-working during the "somewhat artsy-fartsy '60s, when everyone was trying something."

Randi looked up at him curiously from the arrow she was re-fletching, checking its balance on the tip of her finger. "Look, Professor, do you ever let him out?"

"'Him'? Who?"

"Carlson. I mean, you've been in continuous ... possession ... of his body for going on three days now. Do you ever let him take over?"

Ian was surprised at the question, but he had to admit that he had wondered the same thing. Both he and Randi awaited the answer by the light of the fire flickering under the cauldron of molten silver.

Mason blushed. "Ah. Yes, of course." Then he made a face. "Well, you see ... yes, of course, I do. Normally I would have relinquished control of the body at the end of the day's work. That was our arrangement."

"What?" Ian pressed.

Mason looked distinctly uncomfortable at the scrutiny, and devoted his entire attention to the arrow in his hands.

"He *does* know you take over his body, doesn't he, Professor Mason?" Ian challenged, setting down the arrow that he was coating in silver.

"Yes, of course he knows! We made a bargain several months ago when I ran across him in the British Museum. I was ... borrowing ... the body of a student when I saw him. Took some convincing to make him believe it was me. But he saw the possibilities immediately. It's just that ... well, my boy, you see ... Gareth is jealous of your success. Those books and that TV show of yours, you see."

"Gareth is jealous of *me*?" Ian repeated incredulously. "How did he ever see it?"

"He's always been jealous of you. Ever since you were both at Oxford. Don't tell me you didn't know!" Ian shook his head. "He's followed your career every step of the way. Of course, I didn't know that when I came to visit you that time. But he was envious that you'd managed to land such a prime position after graduation, that you'd published several reasonably successful books, when he always had to scramble for funding for his projects and never seemed to get his papers published. He followed your publishing career, often dropping in on signings in disguise. He imported tapes of the show, *Hollywood Variety* to check its ratings."

"And?" Randi prompted.

"And the opportunity to take credit for the discovery of Wayland's tomb, with me actually doing the work, was

just too attractive to him. It was something that was beyond his abilities, but not mine."

"You mean, he traded his body for the chance to become world-famous," Randi guessed.

"Precisely. Oh, he'd found the scroll in some forgotten ruins of a church in northern England. But he couldn't read it. He never did have the facility for language that you possess, my boy," Mason added, nodding toward Ian.

"So —" Randi prodded.

"So. I do the work of translation and guide the dig, Gareth takes the credit. Very simple, really."

"And is he aware — of what you do, I mean?" Ian inquired.

"Oh yes. He's in here. It's just that I am in control until I ... well, until I take leave of the body."

"And why haven't you ... taken leave of the body all this time?"

Mason frowned. Well, he'd already given up Gareth Carlson's worst secrets, another wouldn't hurt. "This is all too much for him, I'm afraid. Moving back in time, facing werewolves, meeting an historical Robin Hood. I'm afraid our Gareth really doesn't have much of an imagination."

Ian clapped his hands and laughed out loud. "The old faker! All those years he had me believing that he was the great adventurer! Allan Quartermain of the '80s. Hah!"

"Yes, well, the discovery will make him famous," Mason reminded.

"And the idea to trade places was his," Randi suggested, eyeing Mason.

"Well, no, not exactly, my dear. Gareth rather thought that finding the scroll was sufficient. I pointed out the possibilities in actually discovering the tomb. Gareth was bright enough to pounce on the opportunity. And of course, I suspected there might be something in it that could be of use to you."

Ian wiped tears of laughter from his eyes and settled back with a self-satisfied sigh. "All those years ..." he shook his head. "Here I'm a greater success than I would have credited."

"Don't let it go to your head. We've still got to do whatever it is this thing wants us to do, and find a way to get home."

Ian sobered immediately and nodded. "And we've still got a great many arrows to prepare."

"And a full moon and a pack of werewolves to face," Randi added.

John and Tuck made for Wickham before first light the next morning. Robin led the others to the practice ground to try out the silver-tipped arrows Randi, Ian and Master Mason had fashioned during the night. The arrows were heavier than normal arrows, but the balance seemed right as he tested one in his hand. Randi had done a decent job of adding feathers to the shaft to counterbalance the heavier arrowheads. Now they'd find out how well they worked.

Scarlet was first up. He nocked the arrow in the bow, resettled his feet to locate his new center of gravity, and let fly. The arrow shuddered a spiral toward the target, and fell a good five feet short.

"Try again, Will," Robin ordered. "We've got to be able to shoot these things if we've got a hope of defeating these werewolves."

Will scowled, but pulled another arrow from his quiver, shifting the position of the arrowhead to a higher point along the bowstring. He pulled back with greater force, and sent the arrow flying. This time, it arced high, its flight more stable, and hit the target outside the bullseye. At least he'd hit the target this try.

"Better. We're going to have to practice, all of us. Are you any good with a bow?" Robin asked the outlanders.

"Well, I did a bit of archery at school ... I imagine I can have a go," Ian replied, picking up a bow and stepping up to the mark as Scarlet stepped aside. He shuffled his feet to find the right stance, nocked the arrow, and pulled back on the bow. The released arrow spiralled upward, hung, and spiralled back down again, a mere ten feet from his position.

"Have a bit of practice," Will warned, grinning.

It was late morning when Tuck and John returned from Wickham, a column of men straggling behind them. Every able-bodied man in the village, and some who were not, had volunteered to help in the expedition against Grimstone Abbey. John had selected some of the best archers, leaving a few to guard the village. As they entered the camp, Randi claimed their arrows and passed them on to Mason for silvering, while Much directed them toward the practice ground to learn how to use the modified arrows. With grim determination, the men of Wickham and the men of Sherwood prepared for battle against the Father Wolf.

By evening, Robin was satisfied that the new arrows would work, and that the assembled "army" would be able to handle them. While the evening meal was being prepared, he slipped away to visit Herne once more.

Shock and panic greeted him as he entered Herne's cave. The place was in disarray, jars and implements scattered and broken on the cave floor. Herne's cauldron had been overturned, the fire burned down to cold cinders. Scraps of deerskin lay where they'd been torn from his clothing. The distinctive smell of wolf clung to the air, and Robin knew the stakes in the battle had been raised to an unacceptable level. He raced back to the camp, as fast as the boat and then his feet would carry him.

Wulfring was a happy man. Although Galen had shied from a skirmish with the Hooded Man, he had nonetheless brought him the Hunter. And the Hunter stood shackled to a third pillar in the chapel, his human body already undergoing the Great Change. Three fine choices — the headman of a local village, the Saracen assassin, and the Lord of the Trees. He could almost feel his master's purr of approval.

And, surely, today the Hooded Man and his men would come to the Abbey, to try to reclaim their people. And his Children would grow stronger.

"Herne? Taken?" Tuck repeated in shock.

"Are the men ready?" Robin demanded.

"Sure, as ready as they can be, but it's dark, Robin — they've already gone back to Wickham for the night. They'll be back in the morning."

"At first light," John promised. "We can't do anything until then, Robin."

Robin nodded curtly. He was nearly shaking with nervous energy. Father Wolf had Herne. And if he could capture the Lord of the Trees, what chance had they?

"The men are ready," Will advised, laying a soothing hand on Robin's shoulder. "We'll get Herne back. And Nasir and Edward, too."

"I just hope we're in time."

Clustered together where they ate their meal, Randi and Ian exchanged concerned glances. Time was running out. Ian had confirmed that tomorrow night was the full moon, and they had no idea how it would affect Randi, sword or no sword. There was no place to contain her in Sherwood, and they couldn't afford to take her into a populated area in case the sword did not prevent her transformation. In this backward time, such a transformation would mean a death sentence for Randi, and she would likely be burned at the stake, or simply slaughtered outright.

"I think our best bet may just be to go to the Abbey," Ian offered.

"What?"

"You saw the place, Randi. It's a fortress. Tuck said it stood against armies in the war between Stephen and Maude. That war tore apart most of the country, and yet that Abbey still stands, and you'd never know it had seen war."

"It also must have cellars. Some of these ancient abbeys have dungeons," added Mason. "If it looks as though we're not winning —"

"Even if we are, once the moon rises, I've got to be chained up," Randi insisted. "These people won't be safe with me. I'm not like these other werewolves — I can't control the change. I could kill them faster than the others!"

Ian had to admit that she was right. Perhaps the sword would prevent the change. But with the lives of so many people at risk, they couldn't take the chance. "We've got to tell Robin the truth. He's been inside the Abbey. He might know where we could take you if necessary."

Ian drew Robin aside, leading him away from the others. Out of earshot of the camp, he laid out their problem.

"She's one of them?" Robin demanded warily.

"She's like them, but ..." he shook his head. "These wolfmen are unlike anything we've ever seen ..." He paused, remembering the man who'd made Randi a werewolf. He had changed in broad daylight, the transformation brought on by the mere sight of Randi. So much they didn't know, didn't understand. He shook his head again. "She only changes on the first night of the full moon. If we can get her to a place where she can be chained up, it will be safe. My guess is the Abbey has dungeons we can use."

Robin nodded, distracted. First this scourge had come to the forest. Then Edward, Nasir and now Herne taken. Now their ally, Randi Wallace, was herself a werewolf. "Yes. There are wine cellars below the main level. The Sons of Fenris kept the villagers and my men captive there. I was chained in the chapel. But we mustn't tell the others — they'll never trust Randi if they know."

Ian agreed. "She's no danger until the moon is risen. If we set off at first light —"

"We'll know one way or another by the time the moon rises," Robin finished grimly.

The sound of approaching men greeted John and Will, at sentry duty, long before the sun had started to make its morning ascent. Both men stood, hands on their weapons, tensed for battle. Michael and David stepped out of the brush, followed by the men of Wickham. Michael raised his hand in greeting, and led his men toward the camp as John and Will stepped aside.

In the camp, the outlaws were already awake, and a breakfast of oatmeal was heating up in the pot over the fire pit. Packs were being loaded with light provisions, and quivers being filled with the modified arrows. Bowstrings were being checked, and blade edges honed. The men of Sherwood prepared for war.

Michael walked up to Robin and stuck out his hand. "Blessed be, son of Herne," he greeted formally.

"Blessed be, Michael." He looked out at the assembled men. "Get your gear and we'll be on the march before daylight."

Randi had taken responsibility for handing out the arrows, and helped each villager fill their quivers with the silver-tipped weapons. Ian checked their packs, and where men had forgotten to carry, or didn't have it to bring, food for the march, gave them small packets of dried meat and grain. Professor Mason checked over the villagers' weapons, and if they didn't come up to snuff, directed them to Much for bow repair, and Tuck for blade sharpening. Finally, all the men were fed, provisioned and armed. Robin stood in the middle of the camp and said simply, "Let's go."

Edward had watched with horror and a strange sort of excitement when Wulfring had bitten deep into Nasir neck, drawing blood and sending the Saracen into a swoon. Nasir had bled for a long time, and then the fever had taken him. He had still been in the throes of the fever when Wulfring had brought Herne into the chapel and chained him to the third pillar. Three pillars. The Church's Holy Trinity. Wulfring's unholy victims.

The sight of Herne, captive, had truly chilled Edward's heart. Until that time, he'd held out hope that Robin would be able to rescue him and Nasir. But with the Lord of the Trees himself Wulfring's hostage ... Edward felt hope ebbing rapidly. When Wulfring turned his attentions to Herne, and infected him with the burning blood, Edward felt real fear, potent and undeniable.

The march to Grimstone Abbey took longer this time than earlier due to the size of the band, and it was mid-afternoon by the time they came to the forest edging the Abbey's valley. Robin sent Tuck and John and Much and Will to scout ahead, and instructed the villagers to take a rest and eat from their packs. With Ian and Randi, he moved on to the promontory overlooking the Abbey.

The open space in front of the Abbey was empty, silent. The earthworks ringing the building were naked, the Abbey gatehouse unoccupied. "They haven't posted any sentries," Robin observed.

"Perhaps they don't feel they need to," Randi commented grimly.

"What's the plan, then?" Ian asked.

Robin continued to look out over the land for a moment before replying. "We can't batter down the doors — they were built to stand against the assault of armies. We've got to get them to open up the doors. We'll set archers there, on the earthworks."

"We're just going to go up to the door and knock?" Randi demanded mockingly.

"Can you think of a better way to get the door open? We can't scale the walls — they're too smooth. We can't knock the doors down. The walls around the orchards and fields are too high to scale, too."

Randi listened to this with growing concern. "Whoever knocks on the door will be a target for the wolves."

Robin nodded, his eyes straying back to the Abbey.

"Then I'm the one who has to knock," Randi added.

"No."

"Yes. I've got the sword — remember, its name means 'wolf-death.' And they won't be expecting a woman. The surprise may give you an extra edge."

"What if they take you — what if —"

"Then once the moon rises, I can do more damage in there than you can," she told him with grim finality.

Robin stared at her for a full minute, then nodded once, reluctantly. Ian remained silent; he knew better than to argue with Randi when she was in this mood.

Inside the Abbey, Wulfring sat on the abbot's throne, watching his three captives with delight. He lifted his head, nostrils flaring. "Ah. Others come. You won't be alone for much longer, my children," he told Edward, Nasir and Herne. As he passed them, each raised his head, turning golden, slitted eyes upon the Father Wolf.

"I don't like it, Robin," Will complained from his position on the windward side of the mound surrounding the Abbey.

"Nor do I, Will," Robin agreed. "But trust me — she's the best choice."

"I don't like trustin' a woman to do a man's job."

"She's an unusual woman," John observed. "She'll do fine."

Ahead of them, approaching the Abbey doors, Randi marched stiffly, Ulfhel held in her right hand. Robin had spent some time with her over the past two days teaching her better swordsmanship. It was now or never.

She came up to the doors and pounded on them with the swordhilt. "Hey! Anybody in there? Open up!"

There was no answer from within the Abbey, only a mocking silence. Glancing over her shoulder at the men hidden behind the earthwork, she shrugged, and tried again.

"Wulfring! I know you're in there! I've got a bone to pick with you, you miserable bastard!"

She heard the sound of a heavy object being moved; the brace across the inside of the doors was being removed. She turned and gave a quick thumbs-up signal to the men, then took a few steps back, positioning herself for a running leap. The door opened a crack, then a little wider. Then it opened even wider, and a man with wild hair and even wilder eyes stepped into view.

"On your way, woman!" the man called in a guttural accent. "There be no Wulfring here to see the likes of you."

"Try again, bucko," she replied and launched herself toward the door. She brought the man down and leapt up again, driving the blade into his chest. With a gurgle, he flinched and fell still. Growling from within warned her that more were coming, and she flung herself into the breach between the doors to ensure they weren't closed against her. Suddenly, she heard the loud twang of a dozens arrows loosed, and dropped to her knees as the arrows whizzed overhead. Three of them found their marks, and the men dropped, convulsing, their faces masks of shock and understanding. A pause, a moment of silence, and then there was shouting, cheering, and the pounding of feet as Robin and his men surged across the gap toward the doors.

Looking around her, she saw a dozen men and more, each in some stage of transformation to werewolf. Ian and Mason were armed with silver daggers, and the villagers had the silver-tipped arrows; they could take care of themselves. She made a feint to her right with the sword, and one of the werewolves jumped out of the way. Good. They recognized Ulfhel. She swung the sword around her in a wide arc, catching one werewolf in the mid-section, and it fell away, clutching its stomach and shaking uncontrollably. Then it, like its comrade, dropped to the ground, returning to the form of a man. The others had gained the hall, and

with a glance over her shoulder, Randi raced toward the closed doors to the chapel.

The doors gave easily, and Randi pushed her way into the chapel, stopping in her tracks at the sight of the three men shackled to pillars near the altar. Nasir and Herne she recognized; the third must be Edward. A sound behind her caught her attention and she whirled, coming face to face with the biggest werewolf she'd ever seen. With a feral smile, it kicked the door closed. It snarled, lunging at her with its great paws outstretched. She backpedalled away, suddenly feeling the hot breath of another werewolf behind her.

"Sorry, I gave at the office," she said inanely, and dropped down into a kneebend, Ulfhel held out straight before her, and jumped up, driving the blade into the entrails of the wolf pursuing her. Tugging to free the sword, she struggled in terror as the second wolf slowly moved toward her. Finally, the blade came free, and she whirled with the sword, catching the wolf in the neck. As it fell to its knees, she raced up the chapel aisle toward the pillars.

She ran up to Herne, who hung limply from the manacles, and pulled his head up. She let go her hold and stepped back, mouth agape, as Herne's eyes opened, brilliant gold, black slitted pupils, his mouth full of fangs. "Wha —" A growling from the other two prisoners told her that Wulfring had already worked the transformation on them. Then a soft voice called her from behind the altar.

"Why do you fight me? You are one of my children. Am I not the Father Wolf? Am I not the one who gave you your great power?"

Wulfring was tall, ascetic-looking, his long dark hair brushed back from a high forehead. He wore dark-colored robes, emblazoned with strange, arcane symbols. He smiled at her, a fatherly, loving smile.

"Great power? You call this curse 'great power'?" she demanded, tightening her hold on the sword.

"Put down the sword," he ordered quietly. "You cannot hurt me."

"Think again," Randi snapped. She started to move toward the altar.

Wulfring looked at her with puzzlement. "No. You are not like my other children. The blood is in you, but it's wild, uncontrolled." He tilted his head, studying her. "Where are you from?"

"A place you'll never see," Randi replied, still advancing.

"The blood rules you!" he exclaimed. "You cannot control it. Even now, it rises to meet the full moon." His voice dropped to a seductive whisper. "No wonder you hate me — the gift is a curse for you. But I can teach you to control it."

This halted Randi, and she watched him warily.

"Yes. I can teach you. My children here," he went on, waving his hands toward the three prisoners, who growled and struggled against the manacles, "they will learn to harness the power. To turn it to their wills. It will not rule them, as it has ruled you. But it will give them great strength, it will raise them above all men. You know the thrill of the hunt. You know the pleasure of the kill. Each day of your life, you know the power the blood gives you — would you truly give that up, if you could learn to control it, learn to raise the wolf when *you* wanted to?" he asked, his voice seductive.

Randi lowered the sword slowly. "You could teach me to control it? Teach me not to kill?"

"To kill is the greatest pleasure, but yes, I could teach you to choose *when* and *what* you kill."

"And what would it cost me?" she asked, watching him move from behind the altar, stepping slowly down to the chapel floor. He moved sinuously, graceful despite his height.

"A simple thing. Obeisance to my lord, Fenris. The Great Wolf. He calls you in your blood. Can you not feel him? Can you not hear the wild call? In Fenris, all things are possible, my child. I have lived more than a thousand years. His gift. I have watched civilizations rise and fall. When the whim takes me, I hunt. I feed. I enjoy all that life has to offer. Can you turn your back on that, that greatness? For mere mortals? They are our prey. They exist to serve our needs. Can you put them ahead of your own desires when everything is within your grasp?" he demanded, reaching out and caressing her cheek with his hand.

Randi looked up at him, deep into his velvet brown eyes. She smiled. "No. Of course not."

He smiled in return, cupping her chin in his palm. "Blood speaks to blood. My children will breed, both through the blood and through the children of their flesh. One day, the Children of the Wolf will prepare

the way for Fenris's ascension. You could stand by me on that day, be my consort in the world my lord brings forth." He bent his head to kiss her, and she lifted her face to meet his lips.

Pounding on the doors arrested his attention, and his head snapped up to look down the chapel aisle toward the doors. The bodies of the two werewolves Randi had killed lay by the doors, blocking them. Wulfring smiled. "Even now, you serve my master's wishes," he said softly. "But our numbers have dwindled. It is time to swell our ranks." He smiled, exposing his long canines. "Open the doors, my child. Let them in. I wish to greet them properly."

He took his hand away from her face, and she took a few steps forward. Then she stopped suddenly, drawing in on herself. With a mighty "No!" she lunged at him, sword held high, the blade biting deeply into his neck. With a sickening crunch, Wulfring's head separated from his body, falling to the floor and rolling toward Edward's feet. Blood fountained from the beheaded neck and the body convulsed wildly for what seemed an eternity before it fell to the cold stones. Edward, Nasir and Herne all raised their heads, their golden eyes glowing, and let forth with open-throated howls. Then a stream of brilliant white light erupted from the corpse, and thousands of tiny explosions shook the body. The head, too, was glowing, light rising from it like an infernal flame. Randi watched, goggle-eyed, as light consumed the body of Wulfring, growing to a blinding intensity.

Just then, the doors broke open, the bodies of the fallen werewolves pushed rudely aside. "Randi!" called Ian, but she was frozen in place, watching the bizarre light show.

"Edward!" called another voice, while another hailed "Nasir!" She heard Robin's voice calling to Herne. She glanced around her, noticing that none of the prisoners showed signs of lycanthropy. "Sever the bloodline." That was it. She'd severed their bloodline. They would not become werewolves.

Suddenly the chapel was full of people rushing up the aisle toward her and the captives.

"Randi!" breathed Ian, grabbing her and hugging her wildly. "You're all right — you did it!"

"The werewolves — what — "

Ian shook his head, swallowing. "I don't know. All of a sudden, they all fell back, howling. We killed some of them, but the others — they just ran off."

"I didn't hear the howling," she answered numbly. "It must have happened when Wulfring died."

Ian touched her cheek with concern and turned her face to look at him. "Randi? Are you all right?"

Abruptly, she doubled over, moaning in pain. "Oh, my God, Ian!" she wailed, dropping the sword as she grabbed onto both his forearms. "It's happening!"

Tuck was lighting torches around the altar to dispel the gloom of sunset. A dim gleam through the chapel's stained-glassed windows told the story: The moon had risen.

Randi writhed in pain as Ian tried to grab hold of her. Robin, who had released Herne from his bondage and was helping him to rub feeling back into his arms, looked up in alarm. "Get out!" he shouted. "All of you! Get out!"

"What's happening?" demanded Will. "Is she possessed?"

Herne's calm voice cut through the melee as he bent down to pick up his antlered helmet, tucking it under his arm. "For your own safety, leave the Abbey. Head for Rhiannon's Wheel. You will be safe there."

Clapping Edward on the back, Will nodded, and the men started to move quickly toward the doors.

"Let me help," Robin told Ian as he struggled with Randi. She looked up at him and snarled, her fangs already long and sharp, her eyes wild and golden. Robin took an involuntary step backward, stunned.

"Get out. Get moving!" Ian bellowed.

"Ian!" Randi wailed.

"Go!"

Robin took another step back, raising his eyes to meet Ian's. Then he nodded, turned on his heel, and raced down the aisle.

"Remember, go to Rhiannon's Wheel!" Herne called after him.

"You'd better go, too," Ian warned, dragging the resisting woman toward one of the pillars.

"You'll need help restraining her," the Lord of the Trees reminded him, lifting one of the manacles. He reached out and snapped it around Randi's left wrist. "Now the other." Ian fought to keep hold of the arm as he lifted her right wrist toward the manacle. Herne closed the manacle and said simply, "Let's go." Ian swallowed hard and nodded once, picked up Ulfhel, and then the pair of them were running away from the Abbey chapel.

Fully transformed, Randi tugged and pulled against the manacles, contorting this way and that for leverage. The shackles had been intended for men, normal men, and it wasn't long before the plates holding them to the pillar began to give way.

Rhiannon's Wheel, the stone circle that had long been a place of power, was closer to Grimstone than the Ring of the Nine Maidens, where Robin had killed Gulnar's creature the autumn before. As the column of men raced toward the safety of the ring, thunder crashed overhead, and a drenching downpour erupted out of the sky. The more superstitious among them were convinced that the gods were angry at their work this day, but their companions reminded them that their own god, Herne, had needed them, and directed them on this headlong rush. The bodies of the fallen had been left at the Abbey, but they would return to reclaim and bury their comrades. But tonight, tonight they must put as much ground between them and the remaining man-wolves.

Ian and Herne had caught up with the column not far from the Abbey, and they walked quickly on either side of Robin Hood.

"There were survivors," Herne stated.

"Yes."

"They will be more dangerous now without the guidance of Wulfring," he observed ominously. "Everyone should take care."

"More dangerous? Are you saying we shouldn't have killed Wulfring?" Robin demanded.

Herne shook his head. "No. Wulfring had to die. He planned to take the entire area, turn them into his kind. From here they would have taken over all of England, and then the continent. Now there are only a few left, and they can be driven off. But until then, everyone should be careful."

"It's possible, too, that without him, they won't operate in groups anymore. No more concerted action," Ian added.

"And the breakthrough of Fenris averted again," Mason pointed out sagely.

Galen, Wulfring's lieutenant, had escaped the carnage at the Abbey, and although he mourned his master's death, he sought vengeance against the rude villagers and outlaws who had taken his master's life. A thousand years and more, ended in a single night at the hands of rabble. He didn't know who had killed Wulfring, but they would all pay for it. Retaining the form of a man through sheer determination, he stalked them, following the column of men as they moved toward Rhiannon's Wheel. He felt the pull of the moon risen high and full in the sky, but he was chosen and trained by his master; as long as he concentrated, he could hold the blood back until the time was right.

At last the manacles sheared away from the pillar, and the wolf was free. Howling triumphantly, it bounded down the chapel aisle, over the human bodies of the werewolves it had killed as Randi Wallace, and out into the night. The scent of other wolves was on the air, the spoor going off in all directions. The strongest scent led directly to Rhiannon's Wheel.

It was still dark when the men, weary, sodden and footsore, finally came in sight of Rhiannon's Wheel. The moon hung directly overhead, framed by the two largest stones in the circle. Robin stood at the entrance to the circle, counting off the men as they filed into the ring. Twenty men, plus his own band. They'd lost three this night. Edward embraced Robin as he passed, thanking the Hooded Man for his rescue. Nasir nodded thanks, too, as he joined the men in the circle. As Tuck passed by, Robin instructed him to try to start a fire if he could, and make sure the men ate something. Finally, only Herne remained outside the protection of the ring with him.

"Go. Look after your men."

"What of you, Herne?" Robin asked worriedly.

"There is still more to be done. I will be all right. You have saved me from the Wolf. It will be a long time before anyone attempts to free Fenris, my son. Now I must set protections against the wolves that still run free."

Clasping hands, Robin lowered his head in agreement. "Blessed be, Robin i' the Hood. You have done well. Now go to your friends." With that, the Hunter walked away, suddenly enveloped by mists that rose up from the ground.

Ian and Mason were helping Tuck set up the fire when Robin rejoined them. He tapped Ian on the shoulder and motioned for him to join him, a little ways away from the rest of the men.

"Will she be all right?" he asked softly.

"If the chains hold," Ian replied. "If not, I'll have a hell of a time finding her. But I will. We've been through this before."

Robin shook his head. "Such a terrible burden. You must love her very much."

Ian smiled wanly. "Oh, yes. I do. We had hopes that ... that we would find a cure." It was Ian's turn to shake his head. "We'll keep looking."

Robin looked off in the distance for a moment, then turned back to Ian. "Herne said that the sword would set her free. She killed Wulfring with it. Herne, Edward and Nasir were released then. Why not her?"

Ian was silent for a long time. Then he answered, "Perhaps there are too many years between them. We don't come from another land, Robin. We come from another time. Over 700 years in the future."

Robin stared at him, stunned. Then he said, "'The sword you carry has waited for you century upon century until you came to claim it.' That's what Herne told her. That she was the chosen of Ulfhel. I thought it was like me, Herne chose me, and his chosen always carries Albion. But the sword waited for her all the way in the future —"

"To come back to this time to kill Wulfring? Perhaps. We may never know." He lifted the sword and stared at it, watching the newborn firelight dance along the runes inscribed in the blade.

"I was raised a Christian," Robin said suddenly. "But the longer I live out here, the more I find I believe that our lives are directed by gods older than time."

"I —" Ian was cut off by the wail of a wolf, loud and close. Suddenly, an enormous man-wolf burst out of the darkness, standing at the entrance to the ring, snarling and spitting. The men scrambled up, edging away from the mammoth creature. It advanced slowly, dropping to a crouch, and there was intelligence in its brilliant eyes.

Robin put his hand out to halt Ian's advance. "The sword —" Ian protested.

"You don't have the skill," Robin warned. "And the sword has not chosen you. That thing would tear you to pieces."

As suddenly as the first werewolf had appeared, a second, more feminine in shape, catapulted out of the blackness beyond the ring, slamming into the back of the first. The howling creatures locked in a contest of wills and power, rolling back and forth across the soil by the fire. Embers popped and shot out from the fire, and the acrid smell of burning fur travelled across the circle.

Robin watched the battle through narrowed eyes, then dropped his hand. "Now, while the beast is distracted."

Ian nodded, skirting around the edge of the circle, sword held point down toward the ground. The big wolf succeeded in throwing off the smaller, but the smaller one simply shook itself and launched itself anew at the male. The men were silent, but the clearing was alive with the tumult of the battle. The smaller werewolf tore at the neck of the larger, pulling away a mouthful of fur and skin. The larger wolf bellowed its rage, erupting from the ground and sending the smaller wolf flying through the air to land back-first atop the fire. It screeched, scrambling away from the flames and rolling over in the dirt to put out the fire that ate away at its pelt.

Ian stood still, watching the melee, his eyes widening with terror as the larger wolf stood not more than five feet away from him. It looked him square in the face, and he would swear it smiled. Its golden eyes dropped to the sword, and then back to his face. With a snarl, it started forward, inexorably, toward him.

He backed up, finding one of the standing stones at his back. Glancing wildly left and right, Ian realized he

didn't have time to run away from this demon, and suddenly remembered the sword in his hand. As the creature lunged for him, he brought the sword up, piercing its hide and driving all the way through. He felt it bite into flesh again, and to his horror, he saw the smaller wolf had leapt onto the male's back, and now hung, impaled on the sword. He felt the hot breath of the werewolf's last exhalation as it fell atop him. He hit his head as he fell, and knew no more.

As soon as the wolves fell on Ian, Robin was racing across the clearing, Will and John right behind. They pulled the smaller wolf off the sword, then the larger, pulling Ian away from the dead animals. To their surprise, both werewolves started to change back into human form.

"Randi," Robin breathed, as the smaller wolf resolved itself into the naked form of the woman who had fought beside him. She wasn't breathing, and blood continued to seep slowly out of the massive wound in her chest. The blade had pierced her in the heart, and already, that heart had ceased to beat. John shrugged off his cape of animal skins and laid it respectfully over Randi's body.

Ian was coming around, and the first thing he saw was Randi's body a few feet away. Quickly he crawled to her, gathering her up in his arms. "No!" he cried, hugging her to him, the hilt of the sword still grasped in his hand. "*No!*" Her lifeless face rolled away from him, and he grabbed at it with his free hand, holding it to his face as hot tears poured down his cheeks.

"The sword will set you free!" called Herne. "The Wheel turns!"

Suddenly, the stones were in motion, revolving faster and faster until they were nothing but a blur. The ground beneath their feet buckled and shifted, sending men sprawling. Mason crawled to Ian, grabbing hold of his shoulders as the man rocked back and forth, the body of the woman he loved held tightly in his arms.

Thunder crashed overhead. Lightning rent the sky. The whirlwind descended and touched down on the ground. And suddenly all was still, and the strange trio were gone.

A jet on its night-time run to Scotland roared overhead, leaving a vapor trail across the full moon. A sudden whirlwind descending from the sky shredded the vapor trail into wisps and fragments. As the mini-cyclone neared the earth, tall grass flattened against the rocky turf. A flash of lightning illuminated the few remaining stones of the ancient stone circle once known as Rhiannon's Wheel, and faded away.

In the somewhat flat space near the headstone of the ring, a huddled trio appeared, two men and the body of a young woman. In one man's hand was grasped a glowing sword. Gradually, the glow faded, and the circle was still.

"Ian?" asked one of the men, raising his head and looking around him. "Ian," he repeated more urgently.

Ian Matheson lifted his tear-streaked face and turned to his mentor and friend, John Mason. He followed the direction of Mason's pointing finger, and found himself looking at telephone wires suspended overhead. A quick glance at the circle showed him an area overgrown with grass and weeds, several of the stones canting dangerous toward the earth, still others missing. Of the outlaws and men of Wickham, there was no sign.

"We're home," Mason said softly.

"Home," Ian repeated dully. He looked down at the body of Randi Wallace and stroked her face. "What does it matter now?" he asked desolately. As he stared down at her face, he frowned. Was that a movement beneath her eyelids? Frantically, he felt for a pulse. It was there! Strong, steady. He hugged her forcefully, causing her to cough.

"Ian?" she asked faintly, opening her eyes. "Ian, what —" Suddenly her eyes widened. The full moon. She pushed him away urgently, staring at the moon. "Ian, we've got to get me —"

"Hush," he replied, grinning like an idiot. "Do you feel any of the symptoms of the change?"

She dropped her eyes, looking at the ground as she studied her internal sensations. "No," she answered in wonder. "But I *did* change. I remember, in the Abbey —"

"That was more than 700 years ago, my dear," Mason said with a smile. "700 years and a curse away."

"You mean —"

"I think we can hope this time," Ian answered, helping her to her feet. "I really do."

It was well past dawn by the time Ian, Randi and Mason found their way back to the Pig's Trotters in 1994 Wickham. The town had changed beyond recognition in 700 years, and they were sure no one would remember Edward, or his wife Alison, or the men who had fought the Father Wolf one early spring day in the early years of the thirteenth century. They would carry that memory always.

The desk clerk looked up curiously at the bizarre trio that trudged into the inn's foyer. His eyes widened further when he realized that it was Professors Matheson and Mason and their friend, all of who, had been missing for several days.

"I say, we've managed to lose our room keys —" Professor Matheson began, gesturing toward the inn's key board.

"Ah. Yes, sir," the desk clerk agreed distantly, reaching for the keys and handing them over. "Ah, will you be needing anything else, sir?"

"I don't suppose we could have some food brought up, my good man?" The clerk nodded, his mouth open. "Wonderful. Steak and kidney pie?" Mason asked Ian and Randi.

"Two," Ian said, his mouth watering.

"I'll ... I'll just have a salad," Randi said, wrinkling her nose. "And some fruit, please."

"Salad? Fruit?" Ian repeated, peering closely at Randi. "No hamburger? No thick and juicy steak?" She shook her head, grimacing. He grinned broadly. "I think you're well and truly cured, my dear," he told her, laughing, and hugged her. She hugged him back, but when John Little's furs started to slip, she gasped, pulled them close, and ran up the stairs before she embarrassed herself further.

"And wine, if you please," Ian added, and raced after Randi.

"Ah. Young love. Inspiring, don't you think?" Mason inquired, and whistling softly to himself, ascended the stairs.

The desk clerk was left to stare after them, shaking his head. "And I thought London was weird."

"Oh, that was good," Randi sighed, leaning back on the pillows. "I can't remember ever being so hungry in my life."

Ian chased the last drop of gravy around his plate with a piece of bread, nodding assent. "Time travel takes a lot of one," he agreed around a mouthful of food.

"So does dying." She snuggled back against the pillows, watching him. "Do you suppose I'm like a cat? Nine lives? I've already died twice, if what you tell me is true."

"Oh, it's true. The sword took you there," he answered, poking her in the chest. "You had no pulse. Nothing. You were dead."

She nodded, toying with the coverlet. "What are we going to do about the sword, Ian? We can't take it back to the States — we'd never get through Customs with it, and we'd be arrested for trafficking in stolen artifacts. We can't leave it — it's too dangerous."

He shook his head. "I don't think it's a danger in anyone else's hands, now. It's served its purpose. And it seemed to have its greatest power when you wielded it. I think ... I think we'll give it to my parents. Knowing them, they'll sling it in the basement and forget all about it. It'll be safe enough there."

Randi laughed. Then she grew quiet again. "You're sure it's over?" she asked softly.

Ian looked at her for a long time before answering. Slowly, he got up, cleared away their plates, and then settled himself on the edge of the huge bed. "There's one final test I think we can perform ... to assure ourselves of the fact."

"What?" Randi inquired, her eyes suddenly fearful.

"This." Ian leaned over and kissed her. Her arms slid over his shoulders, pulling him closer. Their lips parted, and they simply looked at each other for a long moment. Then they both smiled. When the thing they feared would happen didn't, the thing they'd both longed for finally did.

Epilogue

Randi Wallace lounged on the sofa in the Matheson's sitting room, feet dangling over the edge of the arms, the Sunday paper spread out around her. She smiled as she read the story of the archaeological dig near Wickham, where the entire

excavation was suddenly brought to a halt when explosions racked the site, levelling the mound. "'Ancient chemicals in the forge area of the dig,' claimed the dig leader, Dr. Gareth Carlson." More likely strategically located chemical explosives designed to bury Wayland's forge forever, safeguarding the magical artifacts and the world at large.

Ian Matheson came back into the sitting room, smiling absently. He sat on the back of the sofa, and kneaded the muscles of Randi's neck.

"Mmm. That feels good. Who was on the phone?"

"Oh. No one, really," he answered cryptically.

She looked up at him, and saw the barely suppressed grin he was trying to hide. She grabbed him and pulled him over the back of the sofa on top of her. "Who was it?" she demanded, her face inches from his.

He kissed her, then lifted his head and smiled. "Did you really mean it when you said you think of England as our home?"

"Yes," she replied tentatively. "Who was on the phone, Ian?"

"Oh, just the program director for Channel 4. They're looking into launching a program. A serious study of the paranormal. With worldwide distribution."

"And ...?"

He rolled over, dropping to sit on the floor beside her, his arm draped over her shoulders. "And ... they want me to host it. Well, create it, research it, write it, and star in it. I call the shots. No bimbos. No idiot UFO-chasers. Scholarly."

"And ...?"

"And I said I'd think it over. I told him I had a contract with KBLA. He said they'd have their lawyers look at it, and then he tossed out a few figures."

"Nice figures?"

"Very nice," he replied, smiling and kissing her again. "So. You have your choice — where would you like to live, eh?"

She settled back onto the couch, her hand behind her head. "Oh, I don't know. Why don't we try going ... bi-continental for a while? Spend part of the year in California, and the rest of the year here. Think they'll go for it?"

"I think it's worth a try." He pulled her down to kiss her again and smiled.

"And we can start with the legend of Robin Hood, and Herne the Hunter. They deserve to be remembered accurately."

"Amen to that."

There Can Be More Than One

by Patricia A. Ritter

I took the steps two at a time as I raced from the lobby to Chris's room on four. If he was still on eight, I wouldn't have arrived tastefully excited, but exhausted.

"Hey Chris!" I pounded on his door loud enough to wake the dead.

Following the sound of a bolt being turned back, the door opened to reveal a rudely awakened Chris blinking as his eyes adjusted to the bright hall. "Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's time you got up," I replied as I pushed past him and into his room.

"Would you like to come in?" he asked, a touch sarcastic as he shut the door behind me.

The room he had this year was a little bigger than the one he'd had on eight, but not by much. "Oh," I shoved an envelope at him, "you got this in the mail."

"Stealing my mail again?" he asked as I flopped on his bed.

"Oh, c'mon, I *deliver* the mail, remember?" I smiled sweetly. "Think of it as personalized service."

"'Nash Antiques, New York.'" he read. "When did I write them?"

I leaned against the wall as a backboard and thought for a moment. "About a month ago." I nodded. "Yeah, about a month ago. When 'you' sent out that big mailing to a slew of antique dealers."

"Slew?" He shook his head. "The things you Americans have done to the King's English." He made his British accent a little more pronounced as he said that. My only reply was to stick my tongue out at him.

"So," he continued, rapping his palm with the envelope, "what did I say in these letters?"

"That you were looking for a flask and described it. But left the bit out about it being cursed," I hastily added.

About a hundred years before, it had been stolen with a few other family heirlooms. Chris had decided to take it upon himself to see if he could track them down and recover them. I agreed to give him a hand. From the story he'd given me about the flask, it had been stolen from a dying French soldier at the battle of La Rochelle somewhere around 1625. But the Frenchman hadn't been *quite* dead enough and cursed it. His relative had died after being bitten by a rabid dog; what a way to go. The soldier's children had all suffered 'accidents', and his wife, Anabel, had lived to see all her family succumb to The Plague in the late 1600s. Although Chris assured me that the curse had died with Anabel, I wasn't as sure of it as he was. But it was a piece of his family that he was trying to recover and I wasn't going to stand in his way. In fact, I made the mistake of bragging one night that I have a knack for finding things, so I am now giving him a hand. It's not too bad: I do all the legwork and he gets all the bills.

I pointed to the envelope. "I dunno, I have a feeling about this one. Open it and see what it says."

"I am surprised you haven't already," he replied, tearing open the envelope and pulling out the letter.

"Nah, that's one of the first commandments of mail carrierdom — 'Thou shalt not open other people's mail.'"

"I see. Right. 'Dear Mr. Fontaine,'" he began as he tossed the envelope to his desk. "'Thank you for your letter,' blah, blah, blah, blah. Ah, here we are. 'I have two flasks which match your description. Please call to arrange an appointment if you would like to inspect them.' It closes with the phone number, and hours."

He passed me the letter. "Cool," I commented as I skimmed over it. "So, when do you want to meet Russel Nash, Esquire?"

He raised the blinds, opened the window, and leaned out. The cool autumn air brought with it a crisp tang that was deceptive, not of the city. "Oh, I don't know," his voice drifted back to me. "Why don't you make the arrangements and surprise me." He leaned back

Editor's Note: This is the sixth published appearance (and eighth in chronology — VI and VII are still in the works) of the adventures of weirdness-magnet Floyd (a nickname for our blonde, nordic-looking heroine) and her attractive but definitely vampiric boyfriend, Christopher Fontaine. Last issue, Floyd and Chris met each other at the start of the fall semester at Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA. For more background, see the stories in **The Manifest #1.**

into the room and perched on the radiator. "We may as well make a weekend of it."

I peered over the top of my glasses at him. "Where *do* you get all this money?"

He smiled, a grin that almost made me regret my asking. "I don't think you really want to know."

I thought about it and decided he was most probably right. "I'll make the arrangements tomorrow."

He came over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Whatever would I do without you?" he asked with a smile. A wink and a grin was my only answer.

"Nash Antiques, Russel Nash speaking."

True to my word, I started with the calls during the three-hour break between classes that Thursday.

"Hi. I wrote to you on behalf of Christopher Fontaine regarding silver flasks."

There was a brief silence. "Ah, yes. I remember. You had inquired about a filigreed flask, circa late sixteenth, early seventeenth century." He had an odd accent, and 'filigreed' came out more like 'filly-greed.'

"Yes. That's us. I was wondering if I could schedule an appointment to see it this weekend?"

I heard papers shuffling in the background. "I am sorry, but I leave for a buy in Europe tomorrow." There was a slight pause. "However, I have someone coming in to oversee everything while I am gone. I could tell him you'll be by and you can discuss it with him."

"Great. That would be wonderful." We finished ironing out the details. Chris and I would be there about nine Saturday night. He'd leave the flasks with a note for his associate.

My next call went to the Hotel Pennsylvania, across the street from Madison Square Garden and Pennsylvania Station. From what I remembered, it was reasonably priced and close to the subway.

My final call was to Cathie. If she knew I was going to be in her neck of the woods and didn't tell her, she'd never let me live it down.

"Hi, this is Cathie. I can't come to the phone, I'm out walking Jackson. You do your part, and I'll do mine." <beep>

"Hey, you, it's me," I began. "Just letting you know I'll be up this weekend. D'you think you'll be back from walking Jackson by then?" Jackson was her pet turtle. "Chris and I will be staying at the Hotel Pennsylvania so you can leave us a message there."

Not bad, managed to get all my calls done in less than an hour, which gave me plenty of time to walk to the train station and get tickets.

"Oh, come now, why won't you let me drive?" Chris protested as we walked toward 30th Street Station. A favorite Philly spot for films and the setting for a murder in *Witness*, it was soon to be the setting of our argument. "It's not like I haven't ever driven in New York before."

"I am sure you have," I retorted dragging him through the doors. "But was that before or after the Indians sold Manhattan Island?"

"Really, now, it *has* been this century."

"Ah, huh." I scanned the board for our track. Perfect timing, the train was just boarding. "Okay," I said, leading the way, "I'll let you drive the carriage in Central Park." His reply was a scowl as we stepped onto the train. "I've got this thing against driving in New York City," I told him as we found our seats. "Made a wrong turn on my way to Queens and found myself in front of Madison Square Garden." We stowed our bags and sat. I rested my head against the window and watched the people walk by. "It wouldn't have been so bad if it wasn't Friday afternoon rush hour Memorial Day Weekend." And it had been a hot afternoon, the car had been a three-on-the-tree (column shift, really gets strange looks when the passenger thinks you're putting it into drive and you then shift it into second), and no AC. The closest to hell *I* ever want to be.

I heard him chuckle as the train lurched out of the station. I turned and gave him a glare. The laughter sparkled in his eyes. I bit my tongue on a sharp retort and turned my attention back to the window, pretending the scenery speeding by was more interesting than the amused gentleman at my side.

The touch of something cold and wet against the back of my neck made me flinch. Wiping off the condensation, I turned to see Chris offering me a glass

of Chateaux d'Amtrak. "I know you drink ... wine," he said in bad imitation of George Hamilton.

"And now I know you watch bad movies," I replied taking the glass. "What is this, you have a penchant for vampire movies?"

He shrugged. "Why not? I kind of liked *Lost Boys*, and I found *Buffy* very amusing. But look at yourself, every Van Damme release? I would have thought you'd have better taste than that."

I tasted the wine. Not too bad for a mass produced vintage. "Hey, at least I'm honest about it. I just go to stare and watch wellchoreographed fight scenes." I don't go to his movies expecting much and I am seldom disappointed.

"So, what do you know of this 'Russel Nash'?" Chris asked, changing the subject.

"He deals in fine antiques, little things like statuettes, some art, not really any furniture. That's what that roll of stamps was for, I sent letters to promising looking antique dealers and some museums looking for a lead." I took another sip. "I'm not saying that this is 'the' one but he's close and the best one so far."

"Egad, simply astonishing. Holmes, I don't know how you do it," he said, attempting to sound like Nigel Bruce. He commented before that I must have been the reknowned sleuth in a past life. I don't know, my choice would have been A. J. Raffles or Arsene Lupin.

"How many times do I have to tell you — pay attention, think things through, and then go." I paused and sipped for dramatic effect. "And hope it's worth the fiftydollar phone bill."

We checked into the hotel shortly before midnight. The lobby was nearly deserted, too late for the early people and too early for the late people in the "City that never sleeps."

"Come on, Floyd, let me show you the town," he said as we took the lift up to our room.

"I think it's changed a bit since they lit the streets with gaslights," I quipped.

He shook his head as the lift lurched to a stop and the doors slid open. "It hasn't been quite that long," he said leading the way down the corridor. "The seventies, an interesting time to be in New York."

I gave him a skewed look; it wasn't like him to sound reminiscent. "What made it so different?"

"What?" he stopped putting his key in the lock and fixed me with a questioning glance.

"You sounded like you were remembering something. Like what? Were you at Woodstock?"

He shook his head and opened the door. "Never mind."

And once again he remained just a bit enigmatic. "Okay," I began, changing the subject, "know of any good coffee shops?"

"There is one on Bleecker Street I think you'll like the name of," he replied.

"Oh? What is it?"

"Borgia's."

"As in 'Lucretia'?" He nodded. "Oh, gee, and here I thought you liked me."

We got back before the birds were up (figure of speech, I don't think there are any or if there are they'd probably go, "Hey, yo, Tweet!") and I managed to get some sleep before I was supposed to meet Cath at noon. Chris was sound asleep (wonder what he dreams about, if he *does* dream?), I made sure the "Do Not Disturb" sign was hung on the door when I left.

The day was spent wandering the city. Cath pointed out a sign on the other side of the Queensborough Bridge that was destroyed in a movie, which I hear has spawned its own series. I had thought that it was just one of those things that didn't really exist, but I was wrong. We ended up at the South Street Seaport and had a late lunch at the North Star Pub, a homey British place. There was a bit of bustle going about; seems that Guy Fawkes day was in a week and they were getting ready.

I was half-expecting Chris to still be sleeping when I finally walked in at seven. He was already up and dressed and was inspecting himself in a mirror. "Always the natty dresser," I commented sitting on the bed. As usual, his six-foot self was dressed in subtle tones, which seemed to add, rather than detract from, his classical looks.

"'Natty'? I didn't think people used that word anymore." He ran his fingers through his raven-black hair as he turned to face me.

"S'okay," I countered, "most guys aren't dandies anymore either."

He took my hand and hauled me to my feet. "Most guys," he began with a grin, "haven't lived through as many fashion trends as I have."

Earlier in the day, I had gotten my bearings so that I could easily find my way to Nash's store. It was located on Hudson Street in The Village, not too far from the Sheridan Square station. I couldn't understand what the problem people had with the New York subway system was. Didn't think it any harder to figure out than Washington's Metro or Boston's T. And in comparison to Philly's El, it was a real bargain. Further showing that the City of Brotherly Love had among the highest fares for some of the worst service. Once we disembarked at Sheridan Square, it was not much further to Hudson Street and Nash's.

The door was locked and the store dark when we arrived. I wasn't surprised; after all, it *was* Saturday night. I rang the buzzer and was rewarded after a moment with lights coming on and a tall figure striding toward the door. He stopped at a desk about mid-way to pick up keys and then came and unlocked the door.

It opened to reveal someone dressed a little casual for what I would have considered a New York antique dealer — cable-knit sweater, jeans, and long-ish, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. I thought he seemed a bit young to be expert enough to run the place, but if he'd been around this all his life, guess it would be second nature to him.

"Hi. I'm Floyd, and this is Chris Fontaine. I spoke with Mr. Nash about seeing a couple pieces this evening. He said he'd talk to you about it?"

He thought for a moment, and I was a tad worried the trip may have been in vain. Then his expression cleared and he stepped aside. "Ah, yes, Cah-" he caught himself, "Russel did mention it. Flasks, I believe. I'm Duncan," he added, shutting the door behind Chris.

I was surveying my surroundings. Glass cases displayed jewelry, silver-work, and glassware inlaid with gold. What caught my attention was a case proudly displaying a beautiful sword. I left Chris and Duncan to talk business while I went to check out the toy.

"You into swords?" came a voice suddenly behind me. I tried not to jump as I whirled to see a fair-haired guy, about my age, standing behind me. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, sure, no problem." I replied trying to sound calmer than the thudding in my chest indicated.

"By the way, I'm Richie."

"Floyd." I cut him off before the inevitable question. "Please don't ask."

"Okay," he shrugged. "So, you and your friend collect antiques?" The way he said 'friend' sounded like he was fishing.

"Chris collects, I just find," I said with a slight smile.

"*You* are an antique dealer?" His question echoed my earlier impression of Duncan.

"No," I assured him. "I just am very good at finding things. Everyone has to have a hobby, you know. I'd consider it a profession if it wasn't so much work." I glanced to where Chris and Duncan were discussing things. Chris had picked up one of the flasks and was examining the detail of it. I turned back to Richie. He wasn't too bad looking, more contemporary in comparison to Chris's old-world looks.

"Sometimes I find people, sometimes I find things."

That seemed to catch his attention. "People?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm working on one which is turning out to be harder than I would have thought. But then I guess I underestimated how hard it would be to find a dead body." He looked a touch put off by my turn of phrase, but quickly recovered.

"Hey, would you consider taking another case?" he asked hopefully.

I shook my head. "Not right now." I nodded toward Chris and Duncan. "These two cases are more than enough right now."

He tried to hide his disappointment. "Oh, I see. Maybe some other time —"

"Richie!"

We both turned our attention to Chris and Duncan. Duncan seemed to be listening to something just on the edge of his hearing. As though he could hear a voice but couldn't quite make out the words. "Take her and Chris up to Connor's loft," he said, scanning the place for the source.

"But —"

"Do it!" he snapped.

Richie took my arm and started to lead me to the lift. "C'mon, Floyd."

"What's going on?" I didn't bother to hide my confusion. I was sincerely hoping that this wasn't going to be a weirdness. I was so looking forward to a nice quiet weekend, maybe take in a mugging or a movie. Not a weirdness.

"I can't explain, just come on!" He pulled me along as the only explanation.

I spared Chris a glance, he was still near Duncan and also looking around for whatever it was that Duncan noticed.

"I don't know either," he said, "just go with him."

"You too, Chris." Duncan ordered as he pulled something from behind the desk.

The light glinted off of a beautiful katana, putting the one I had at home to shame.

"No, I don't think so." Chris indicated the sword. "Nice piece of work, but an extra set of hands might be more useful."

Duncan was about to argue but gave in. "Fine, it's your neck," he reluctantly consented.

We were almost to the lift when there was a terrible crash. We turned to the sound as someone hurled through one of the large storefront windows.

"MacLeod!"

Richie recovered before I did, and hauled me off balance away from the shattered window. The lift was just beyond a door which was suddenly wrenched open to reveal a gun followed by someone looking a lot like Emilio Estevez on a bad day.

"Ho, shit," Richie muttered.

"Okay, now what?" I asked, putting Richie between myself and the gun.

My question was answered by a light tap on my shoulder as Chris stepped past me and Richie, and in front of the gunman. "Get back, you two," he said, pushing Richie aside.

Knowing better than to argue, it was my turn to drag Richie toward a display case I saw that looked to be the safest refuge at the moment. It was a big heavy wooden case with a glass top and just far enough out from that wall that we were able to squeeze behind it. Like something out of a B-movie, we peeked carefully through the glass part of the case to watch what was going on.

The first thing that happened was a gunshot. Chris staggered back a step, recovered and advanced on the gunman. A second and third shot slammed into him, and I winced in sympathy.

"I *hate* being shot at," he snarled, grabbing his assailant by the lapels and threw him back through the door through which he entered, then followed him out to the back.

"He was shot point blank," Richie muttered. "Why — Oh."

"Shush," I admonished.

Knowing Chris was going to be fine (I'd seen him be shot before — and what a first date *that* was), I turned my attention to Duncan and the rude visitor. Well, it is New York, maybe they aren't as picky about doors as we are a little further south.

"You're not MacLeod," he said. He was dressed in a suit (Dior?), and for some reason, the broadsword he held didn't look that out of place in his hand. He stood a little taller than Duncan with dark, shoulder-length hair hanging loose.

Duncan held the katana in a ready stance. "I am Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod."

The invader was a little taken aback. "Brothers?" he said with derision.

"Clansmen," he replied, not letting his attention wander. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am Pitor Nikolov. I came for Connor's head, but I'll take yours instead!" He advanced on Duncan.

The sight of two grown men wielding swords in the middle of a New York antique shop surrounded by broken glass made me chuckle. I knew it wasn't a laughing matter but it was the incongruity of the situation that made it amusing.

"What is it, haven't you seen two Immortals fight before?" Richie asked as though this should have come as a surprise to me.

"No, I don't normally see sword fighting outside of Ren events." The ring of steel on steel punctuated my sentence.

"You mean Chris didn't tell you about the Gathering?"

"Tell me about the *what?*" I spared him a little of my attention from the sword fight. It was a lot different from what you see in performances. It wasn't staged to entertain the people sitting in the cheap seats (though when 'Licia and I had seen a demonstration, we were the only ones in the front row and it hadn't taken us long to find out why), rather they were out to kill or die trying. I hoped Nash's insurance was up to date.

"Are you two all right?" a familiar voice whispered off to my left as a hand settled on my shoulder. I wrapped my hand around it.

"Yeah, we're fine," I told Chris. "What about you?

"Of course," he said in a tone that said I should be ashamed for asking such a silly question. He turned to watch the fight. "What did Duncan say his name was, MacLeod?"

"Yeah," Richie replied. "You're one of them too, aren't you?"

"It's not what you suspect," Chris replied.

"Why do I have the feeling I'm the only one without a clue?"
Chris patted my shoulder. "If it's what I think it is, let's hope Duncan wins. Now hush."

The shop was a mess. Several cases had been overturned during the fight, though most of the place remained relatively intact (it's a good thing he didn't deal in Ming vases). If it wasn't such a 'duel to the death' I would have been able to enjoy it better. As it was, I just could just sit back and watch it quietly.

Duncan parried a blow and managed to nick Nikolov's neck. The other pulled back in anger, but not fast enough.

With a shout of "There can be only one!", Duncan stepped in and neatly separated Nikolov's head from his shoulders. There was surprisingly little blood as the body dropped to its knees and collapsed to the floor. To my surprise, Duncan extended his arms as his sword fell from limp fingers.

That was the last I saw before Richie shoved me down and threw himself over me. That wouldn't have been so bad if Chris hadn't added himself to the pile. There was a gap at the bottom of the display case which allowed me to breathe and gave me a four-inch view of the shop. I heard a rushing sound, like the air being sucked to a vacuum, saw bright flashes as though lightning was being loosed in the room, which was followed shortly by the sound of shattering glass. Duncan's scream of painful ecstasy only added to what I was almost witnessing.

Fortunately it wasn't too long before the guys got off of me and both helped me to my feet. If I thought the place was a mess before, it was a mere introduction of how bad it could be. Anything breakable that had survived the duel was shattered. Duncan was surrounded by wreckage and looked as though he had been hit by a truck. Several times.

When we were clear of the remains of the case we'd hidden behind, I grabbed Richie with one hand, Chris with the other, and said, "Will someone *please* tell me what is going on?" I wasn't liking being the only one out of all of us who was totally clueless.

"Mac, like Chris," Richie began, "is an Immortal."

We picked our way through the remains of the shop to Duncan's side. "Ah, not quite, Richie," Chris replied.

"I saw you shot and you're not dead," he argued. "Hey, Mac, you all right?"

Duncan spared us a pained smile. "I will be." He looked at Chris as though trying to see something he missed before.

Chris sighed. "'Undead' and 'Immortal' are not quite the same thing," was his reply.

"'Undead'?" Richie started to put things together and didn't look too thrilled with his answer.

Chris grinned a long-toothed grin. "I believe the word you're looking for is 'vampire'," he said, an underlying hint of mirth in his tone.

"That's right, Richie," I said with a grin, "one of the Legion of the Damned, a Childe of the Night." He looked at me as though I should admit the same. "No, I'm not. I'd say 'human just like you' but too many weird things happen to me for me to say that." I looked at Duncan, who was starting to look a little better for wear. And a little surprised about Chris's admission.

"Well," Duncan said, sheathing his sword, "I guess that explains why I didn't sense his presence. An' here I was thinking those were just other Immortals, a case of mistaken identity."

"Not quite," Chris admitted. "We don't go about lopping off each other's heads screaming, 'There can be only one!' for some sort of prize." A brief frown crossed his brow. "Not so nice or polite. But when you're the spawn of the Devil, that is oft the case." A bit of the mischevious Chris I knew crept back, and a bit of twisted mirth danced in his eyes.

Duncan shook his head. "Crude, but close enough. I am sorry about the flask, though," he added.

"You mean I was wrong?" I asked.

Chris nodded. "They were the right style, but not quite right. There should have been a repaired dent caused by a bullet during the American Revolutionary War. Saved Peter's life, the fool, underestimating the colonists."

"So I guess that's that." I extended my hand to Richie. "Well, it was nice meeting you. If you see *this* regularly, then I guess meeting a vampire is kinda passè."

He took my hand and gave Chris a wary glance. "Like anyone would believe me."

And to Duncan, "Shame about Mr. Nash's shop. Wonder if there's Not-Quite-Act-of-God coverage?"

"Oh, I think he'll understand," he said. As he clasped my hand, he smiled. "Maybe we'll meet again sometime."

Chris wrapped his arm about me as we walked back through The Village. "Why do I have the feeling that Duncan was right?"

"About what?"

"About meeting again."

"Did it seem 'weird'?"

"Yes."

He gave me a squeeze. "Then you probably will."

I sighed. "I was afraid of that."

Acknowledgements

A bunch of special thank yous are in order as this zine comes to a close. First and foremost, the people who helped produce this zine — Kathy Sullivan and Joyce Riffle for their assistance in editing my own material (Joyce also got pressed into service proofreading and checking for medical accuracy the final copy of the zine at Malice Domestic, the "cozy" mystery convention we attend every year in Bethesda, MD in April — highly recommended!), and Mary Bloemker, without whom all the nice graphics of the various program logos would not have appeared in this zine.

Mary also gets high marks for pointing me in the right direction for software — this issue of **The Manifest** was produced using WordPerfect for DOS 5.1, with TrueType for DOS providing multidinous nice fonts without the overhead of Windows, and some graphic images produced using GeoWorks 2.0's export feature to create images and then make them into something WordPerfect could read. Perhaps the most useful software Mary instructed me to use was ConvertPerfect, which allowed me to translate all six (6) disks of H. L. Avry's epic from WordStar 5.0 to WordPerfect. When those six disks arrived and WordPerfect's own convert program couldn't handle them, it was almost time to panic, until I finally installed ConvertPerfect — and ten minutes later, I had the entire story converted into WordPerfect and in a single file.

Thanks are also due to the the folks at the office, most especially Dwight Abbott, who helped fix my PC after five months (count 'em, *five months*) of downtime, and Carol Sugerman, who sits across from me and thinks all of this is pretty neat. Thanks are also due to L. C. Wells, for providing an excellent critique of issue #1, which led to some of the changes in this issue.

In The Beginning ...

by Deb Walsh

In response to suggestions from our readers, we offer background for the stories included in this volume. Some of the material here is reprinted from **The Manifest** #1. Please note that addresses and information on fanzines and clubs listed here were current (or reasonably so) at the time of publication and are not guaranteed to be correct and current. Always include a SASE to the editor or fan club president for current information before sending money.

Pilot (The Dark Knight, parts 1 and 2), I Will Repay

800-year old vampire Nick Knight was searching for a way to regain his humanity. A Crusader in Frederick II's capture of Jerusalem, Nicholas the Knight was seduced by beautiful vampire Janette, and brought over by her vampire master LaCroix in the year 1228. For many centuries, he travelled the world with his mentor LaCroix and Janette. At times, they parted company only to reunite later, until finally Nick decided to pursue his lost humanity. LaCroix, both friend and master to Nick, refused to allow Nick to cross back over, and consistently foiled Nick's attempts to find a cure for his vampirism. Only LaCroix's apparent death freed Nick from this interference.

Among Nick's various personas through the centuries had been a field doctor in the Union Army during the Civil War, an Associate Professor of Archaeology at the University of Chicago, and a rock performer at Woodstock. Suffering from the "Dorian Gray syndrome," Nick had to leave each of his lives behind him as the world grew older around him. After being brought to Natalie Lambert as a corpse following an attempt to save humans from a bomb, Nick's vampiric nature healed him, actually pulling his lost blood back into his body. Natalie convinced him that she had hopes of curing him, and he became homicide detective with the Toronto Metro Police, working the night shift with his partner Don Schanke. Medical Examiner Doctor Natalie Lambert was the only human who knows his secret, and was helping him to cross back over. Janette continued to live in Toronto, proprietress of the exclusive nightclub, The Raven, which also serves as home to a number of vampires.

In "I Will Repay," Natalie's younger brother, Richard, was shot during a prisoner escape at Police Headquarters. He was a lawyer for the Crown, and distraught over his deteriorating condition, Natalie begged Nick to turn him into a vampire. Nick's experiences in bringing other vampires across had all been bad, and he refused at first. But Natalie's curses and pleadings finally convinced him to try it. Nick turned Richard into a vampire as he lay dying in the hospital. At first, it appeared that the transformation was going well. Richard called his wife and assured her that he was okay, despite the reports of his death. Growing restless, Richard left Nick's apartment, and tracked down the criminals he had been unable to get in court. Richard discovered the power he had as a vampire, and he was unwilling to live quietly. He attempted to turn his wife into a vampire, too, and finally, Nick was forced to destroy him, before he destroyed all those around him. In the end, Natalie agreed that Nick had been right, and she assumed the guilt for Richard's actions.

Factoids — Forever Knight

In 1954 in Chicago, Illinois, Nick Knight taught under the name of Professor Nicholas Girard, Associate Professor of Archaeology.

Toronto Metro PD Detective Nick Knight's police radio ID is 81 Kilo.

The license number on Detective Nick Knight's 1962 Cadillac is 35HMV6.

Detective Don Schanke's wife's name is Myra, and his daughter is named Jenny. Schanke has a fondness for souvlaki, polkas, and Bachman Turner Overdrive.

Medical Examiner Doctor Natalie Lambert lives with her cat, Sydney.

The Raven, a letterzine devoted to *Forever Knight*: $6 every 6 months (subject to change as **The Raven** expands) - tentative publication schedule every 6 weeks. Write to Amy Hull and Paula Sanders, 603 W. Walnut, Carbondale, IL 62901. E-Mail address: GR4932@SIUCVMB.SIU.EDU (Internet).

Good Guys Wear Fangs II features some *Forever Knight* fiction, as well as Nick Knight and other vampire genre fiction and poetry. A future issue is planned. Contact Mary Ann B. McKinnon, 254 Blunk Avenue, Plymouth, MI 48170. Mary Ann also does the **Good Guy Vampire Letterzine**. Include a SASE for information on either publication.

Samskar is a *Forever Knight* novella written by gh coyote and published by Fenris House, Special Services Unlimited, P.O. Box 684, Hewitt, NJ 07421. SASE for information.

Barbara Fister-Liltz publishes an all-*Forever Knight* fanzine called **Knightbeat**. For more information, send a SASE to Barbara at 8601A W. Cermak Road, N. Riverside, IL 60546.

On the Wings of the Knight is a *Forever/Nick Knight* fanzine edited by Ann Hupe. SASE to Peg Kennedy and Bill Hupe at Footrot Flats, 916 Lamb Road, Mason, MI 48854-9445. A second issue is planned.

Knight Times is an adult *Forever Knight* fanzine. For more information, send a SASE to Star Urioste, 27436 Palmwood Avenue, Hayward, CA 94545.

The Official Nigel Bennett Fan Club can be reached by SASE to Peggy Religa, 960 Junesong Way, San Jose, CA 95133.

The Manifest #1 also includes a *Forever Knight* story by yours truly, and more is sought for future issues. For information, send a legal-sized SASE to the editorial address.

Just My Type features a *Forever Knight/Quantum Leap* crossover, as well as *Nick Knight* and *Lost Boys* fiction. Some of this fiction is adult in nature. SASE to Mystery Frank, 145 LaFontenay Drive, Louisville, KY 40223-3123. A second issue may be planned; SASE for information. E-Mail address (GEnie): M.FRANK7 (or M.FRANK7@genie.com via Internet).

Issue #2 of **Temporal Times** features a *Nick Knight/Quantum Leap* story (illustrated by your editor). For more information, SASE to Mary Bloemker at 2655 6th Street NE, Birmingham, AL 35215-2707.

The Official Geraint Wyn Davies Fan Club membership includes 2-4 newsletters a year, an autographed photo (genuinely autographed, not done by some secretary somewhere), and a few other goodies. SASE to Rose Mary Shad, 4133 Glendale Road, Woodbridge, VA 22193 for current information.

For information on The *Forever Knight* Fan Club, send a SASE to the club at P.O. Box 1108, Boston, MA 02103-1108. This club hosted the first-ever *Forever Knight* convention in Boston in March 1994, "Dead of Winter" Con.

Indiana Jones was first introduced in the films *Raiders of the Lost Ark, The Temple of Doom,* and *The Last Crusade.* In those films, he was established as an accomplished adventurer, an archaeology professor at Barnett College, and an epic hero. In *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles,* the adventures of the world's best known archaeologist were further explored. In the series, Indiana elected to forego returning to Princeton in favor of joining the Belgian army with his friend Remy, and served during World War I. Signing up under a false name, Indy rose quickly through the ranks, thanks to his incredible luck, his facility with languages, and his instinct for survival. Following the War, Indy then enrolled at the University of Chicago, where his college roommate was the inestimable Elliot Ness. Together with Ernie Hemingway, they worked to solve the murder of Indy's employer. Although the corrupt police officials would not recognize their evidence, their adventure brought Elliot Ness into contact with Al Capone for the first time.

Factoids — Indiana Jones

The *Indiana Jones* fan novel, **Burnt Offerings**, and several issues of the *Indiana Jones* fanzine **Fortune and Glory** are available from Mary Jean Holmes, 10534 W. Cortez Circle #7, Franklin, WI 53132. SASE for information.

See also **Keeping Up With The Joneses**, an *Indiana Jones* newsletter and letterzine published by Jeanne Webster, 416 East 241st Street, Woodlawn, NY 10470. SASE for information.

Another *Indiana Jones* fanzine worth checking out is **Field Studies**, published by Cheree Cargill, 457 Meadowhill Drive, Garland, TX 75043. SASE for information.

The Haunting of Heck House, The Thing in Miss Faversham's Attic, Three Men and an Egon, The Spirit of Aunt Lois.

Three college professors (Spengler, Stantz and Venkman) specializing in the paranormal were fired from their jobs at Columbia University. In an effort to make it in the "real world" they opened business as the Ghostbusters, making use of the various inventions and theories of Spengler and Stantz. With their secretary Janine Melnitz and assistant Winston Zeddemore, the trio found themselves facing the reality of ghosts, goblins, and ghouls in the Big Apple.

In "The Thing in Miss Faversham's Attic," the sweet, aging Miss Faversham came to the Ghostbusters for help against the creature that has lived in her attic all her life. When they investigated, they found a demon had been raised by her father, but her father, in order to protect his young daughter, had reneged on the pact he'd made with the demon. Driven insane by its years trapped in the attic, the demon was searching for Faversham to exact its revenge. The Ghostbusters fought the demon in its many manifestations, as the demon took furniture and other objects from the attic to fashion a body for itself. Finally, the Ghostbusters captured the demon and contained it. In the meantime, Peter Venkman had discovered a surrogate mother, and returned to visit Miss Faversham.

In "The Haunting of Heck House," the Ghostbusters were offered one million dollars each for spending a full night in the most haunted house in the world, Heck House. In Heck House had been assembled the largest number of ghosts ever, well over 2,000, called by spells and held there. As the Ghostbusters battled the ghosts, they hit upon a solution to the problem, but the solution caused the house to implode on itself, and they were forced to escape before sunrise. Although they had defeated the house, the fact that they were no longer inside it as the sun rose cost them their million dollar prizes.

Also cited in "Leftover Souls" is "The Spirits of Aunt Lois," in which Ray Stanz's Aunt Lois was haunted by Russian house spirits (the boys managed to get all the spirits back in their proper places after they had been angered by a charlatan spiritualist). In "Three Men and an Egon," Egon was affected by a time-linked ghost, and lived his life backwards, eventually becoming an infant. And yes, Peter did take blackmail photos, before the guys managed to reverse the process by capturing the ghost and reenacting the incident which had started the time regression for Spengler.

Factoids — Real Ghostbusters

In addition to Sheila Paulson's zines, other highly recommended *Real Ghostbusters* fanzines include the following; please note that these are zines that your editor has read and can recommend; there are a lot of other *RGB* zines out there that I haven't gotten to yet:

RGB novels **Nearly Fatal Attraction, Breathless Anticipation** and **Crimea River** are available from Pam Spurlock, 256 Vester, Ferndale, MI 48220. SASE for information.

PKE Readings, one of the best *Real Ghostbusters* fanzines in print, is available from B.J. Tandarich, 843 Columbian, Oak Park, IL 60302. SASE for information.

Marginal Error (multi-media novel), **Root of All Evil, The Times They Are A'Changin'** (crossover novel with *Back to the Future*), and **Shadowstar** (multi-media zine, several issues contain excellent *RGB* fiction) are available from Mary Jean Holmes, 10534 W. Cortez Circle #7, Franklin, WI 53132. SASE for information.

And **Trap Open!** is available from your humble editor. As of the time this zine was going to press, submissions were eagerly sought for the second and final issue of **Trap Open!.**

Also available is the *Real Ghostbusters* amateur press association (APA), APARitions. For information, send a SASE to A. 'Nea Dodson, 3741 Evans Trail Way, Beltsville, MD 20705.

We Got One! (cover by yours truly) is available from Kathy Agel, 9-11 Ayres Court, Bayonne, NJ 07002-3510. SASE for information.

ROBIN OF SHERWOOD (a.k.a. *Robin Hood*): Robin of Loxley: Robin Hood and the Sorcerer, The King's Fool (a.k.a., Richard the Lion-Hearted), The Greatest Enemy, Robert of Huntingdon: Herne's Son, Time of the Wolf

Robin of Sherwood was Richard Carpenter's updating of the Robin Hood legend. In the series, Sherwood Forest was protected by the god Herne the Hunter, who inhabited the body of an old man. In the series pilot, "Robin Hood and the Sorcerer," Herne's champion among the people was first Ailric, who was killed by the Sheriff of Nottingham, and then his son, Robin of Loxley, who was raised by the miller along with the miller's son, Much. As Robin became an adult, he was drawn to the defense of the downtrodden, and was declared "wolfshead" or criminal, by the Sheriff when he was captured by Sir Guy of Gisbourne. His offense was the killing of a deer, the protected animal belonging to the King in all the forests of England. It had been his foster brother, Much who had killed the deer, but Robin took the blame. Escaping from the dungeons of Nottingham, Robin met the fiery young Saxon woman, Marian of Leaford, the Sheriff's ward. The two fell instantly in love, and Robin escaped into Sherwood Forest, where he met Herne. Herne claimed Robin as his son, Robin i' the Hood, the Hooded Man.

Assembling a group of ruffians and criminals, Robin formed his band of outlaws: Will Scathlock, who took the name of Scarlet when his wife was killed by soldiers; John Little of Hathersage, known as Little John, a joke on his great size; Much, Robin's foster brother; Friar Tuck, a renegade monk; Nasir, the Saracen assassin who had been brought to England as the bespelled slave of the sorcerer de Belleme; and Marian of Leaford, who became Robin's wife. Armed with the magic sword Albion, one of the great swords forged by the Norse smithgod, Wayland, Robin led his band in fighting oppression, stealing from the wealthy to feed the poor, and battling against the forces of evil drawn to Sherwood. Together, they worked for the rights of the villagers, and they were embraced by the people, especially the people of the village Wickham, led by Edward, the headman, and his wife Alison.

In "The King's Fool," Robin and his men captured a knight who proved to be King Richard the Lion-Hearted. Entranced by Robin's prowess, Richard invited him back to court, where Robin and his men are put on display. One by one, the men of Sherwood abandon Robin to return to Sherwood. When Robin gave an impassioned speech about the rights of the people, Richard decided he'd become an embarrassment. The Sheriff and Gisbourne took the opportunity to ambush the outlaw band, and Marian was fatally injured in the escape.

Riding hard to Rhiannon's Wheel, a magical stone circle, Robin and Marian escaped the Sheriff, but Marian was dying from the arrow in her back. Marian begged Robin to pull out the arrow and let her go. He called upon Herne as he did so, and Herne invoked the magic of Rhiannon's Wheel, turning the wheel and bringing Marian back to life, and the outlaws back to their leader.

In "The Greatest Enemy," the Sheriff finally reached his limit. Frequently embarrassed by the outlaw band, and frustrated by the constant drain on his coffers and criticism from King John, the Sheriff of Nottingham mounted an all-out attack on the outlaws, finally bringing Robin of Loxley down in a hail of arrows on a tor in Sherwood, and capturing the outlaws.

All believed that the reign of the Hooded Man, Herne's Son, Robin i' the Hood had ended. But Herne chose a successor, Robert of Huntingdon, the heir to the Earl of Huntingdon. In "Herne's Son," Robert at first refused to join Herne, instead embarking on a one-time-only rescue mission to save the outlaw band from the Sheriff. He renounced his claim as Herne's Son and returned to his father's castle. But when Marian of Leaford, reinstated by the King, was a guest at Huntingdon and was insulted by Owen of Clun, Robert was driven by love and a sense of justice to set things right. Eventually, he too was declared wolfshead, and joined the reunited rebel band in Sherwood Forest.

In "Time of the Wolf," the druid wizard of Owen of Clun, Gulnar, attempted to free the Norse god of chaos, Fenris, the Great Wolf. He assembled the survivors of Owen's men, inciting them to ransack and pillage the countryside as they moved toward Sherwood. Among Gulnar's plans was to capture and destroy Herne the Hunter, a long-time enemy of Fenris. Taking Grimstone Abbey, a Benedictine abbey, and murdering all the monks, Gulnar and his "Sons of Fenris" captured the women and children of Wickham as bait to lure Herne's Son into Gulnar's clutches.

In Sherwood, Robin had finally convinced Marian that what they felt was truly love for each other, and she accepted his proposal of marriage.

In the meantime, the Sheriff was amassing all the grain and foodstuffs from the people of Sherwood and Nottingham, to turn over to the King for his Welsh campaign. Led by Robin and his men, the men of Wickham reclaimed the grain and hid it deep in Sherwood. Upon returning to their homes, they found their woman and children gone, only a pair of children hidden away left to tell the story of the Sons of Fenris.

Organizing the men of Wickham, Robin planned to attack the Abbey and free the prisoners. Marian and John had gone on to Halsted Abbey with the children, and Robin could no longer wait for their return before attacking. Scarlet complained bitterly of the inadequacy of the force, sniping at the men of Wickham for their ineptitude. When the men attacked the Abbey, the Sons of Fenris were ready for them, and the men — including Robin Hood and his outlaws — were captured.

Gulnar shackled Robin to a pillar in the Abbey's chapel, and fashioned an artificial man in his image. The man-beast, half-man, half-wolf, went out into the world to destroy ... not only people and property, but Robin's reputation as well. And his ultimate goal was to insinuate himself to Herne and kill him.

At the Abbey, recovering from a wound, Marian had a premonition that Robin was about to die. In the meantime, Robin escaped from Gulnar. Gulnar himself met up with his creature, and was killed.

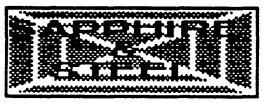
Gulnar's replica of Robin met Herne in the Ring of the Nine Maidens (Rhiannon's Wheel in the novelization of the story), but Herne recognized that this man-beast was not his son. Robin had followed the clues Herne had given him, and caught up with the man-beast at the Ring, killing him. It was the body of the man-beast that a panicked Marian found there.

Sure that the threat of Fenris was over, the outlaws rejoined the villagers and prepared for the wedding feast. Robin rode to Halsted to collect Marian, only to discover that, believing him dead, she had become a postulant of the order. She told him that she no longer had the strength to love him and suffer awaiting his death again. Without Marian and heartbroken, Robin Hood returned to Sherwood with the children.

Factoids — Robin of Sherwood

For *Robin of Sherwood* fiction, the obvious recommendation is **Albion**, published by Helen Avry and Laura Blunk. For more information, send a SASE to Helen L. Avry, 490 East Twinsburg Road, Northfield, OH 44067.

Spirit of Sherwood is an authorized *Robin of Sherwood* Appreciation Society. For more information, send a SASE to Spirit of Sherwood, 1276 West Marshall, Ferndale, MI 48220. The club also sponsors a convention (Weekend in Sherwood) and the Major Oak Awards, a *Robin of Sherwood* fannish achievement award.



The Service Station (a.k.a. The Trap). See also this issue's "Curriculum Vitae" for a general description of the series.

In the final serial of *Sapphire and Steel*, the two operatives found themselves in a service station. Their only companions were a strange Man and a Woman, from another time, and Silver, a technician, who had arrived at the site of the time break six hours in advance of Sapphire and Steel, an unusual event in itself. Time had stopped in this place, overlapping and intertwining; the radio continued to play the same few seconds of music over and over again. Then, time shifts began to occur, each moving forward ten minutes. This continued to happen, and each time a time shift occurred, someone new found their way into the cafe attached to the service station.

With the exception of the Woman, the characters assembled in and around the cafe were "Transient Beings," people with powers similar to Sapphire, Steel and Silver, but supposedly trapped in the past. Using a "Time box," they had managed to invade Sapphire and Steel's present, and their purpose was to punish the pair for refusing to join them when they were to invited long ago. Silver managed to replicate the Time box. When he, Sapphire, Steel and the woman attempted to escape the trap, the woman betrayed them. Although Steel tried to use the Time box on the Transient Beings, they were faster.

Suddenly, Sapphire and Steel found themselves arriving at the cafe again. Silver was nowhere to be seen, his fate unknown. The Man and Woman told them that this was the trap, a trap they will never escape, and then they disappeared. The Time boxes had become nothing but travelling chess sets. And outside the cafe was nothing but space. Nowhere. And forever.

Factoids — Sapphire and Steel

The six *Sapphire and Steel* serials have been released on video in the U.K., but there have been no announcements made regarding Canadian or U.S. release. Rumor has it that

the show is now available to PBS stations, and was going to premiere in California in the spring of 1994.

P. J. Hammond's novelization of the first *Sapphire and Steel* serial is again in print and available from specialty shops dealing in British imports.

SHADES OF LA

There are no specific references to episodes of the series cited in the stories in this issue.

Shot down in the line of duty, Detective Michael Burton found himself in the astral plane, surrounded by ghosts. When he awoke in the hospital, he wrote the experience off as an anomaly, an out-of-body experience. His nurse's aide, Annie Brighton, warned him not to tell the doctors since he might end up in the mental ward. She helps him to relax and put the experience behind him. But even after his recovery, he found himself able to see and talk to ghosts — the shades of LA. Those shades looked to Burton for help in resolving the loose ends of their lives, and Burton found himself trying to balance the needs of the living against the needs of the dead.

Among Burton's associates are Liz Carmelli, a fellow police officer who transferred into the Westside Division from a desk job in Northside. On their first case together, Liz panicked, and after Michael is injured, decided to go back to her old job. Convincing Liz to try again, Michael included her in the follow-up stakeout, where she proved her mettle under fire. Burton and Carmelli's superior, Lieutenant Thomas Wesley, is a career police officer in the LAPD. Although Wesley long suspected that Michael was somehow affected by his near-death experience, Michael never admitted that the "shades" continued to appear to him after he met with the police psychologist. Michael lives in a house he rents from his Uncle Louis, a gruff older man who runs a junkyard, provides all of Michael's "rent-a-wrecks," and knows just about anything worth knowing about LA and its inhabitants.

Sophia R. Mulvey and K. Rae Travers, authors of "Brother Love," publish a *Blake's 7* fanzine, **The Seven Live On.** For more information, send a SASE to them at 830 South Main, Pascoag, RI 02859.

Factoids — Shades of LA

LAPD Detective Michael Burton's cat is named Buster. Buster is able to see and touch the ghosts that haunt Michael.

Burton's full name is Michael Nolan Burton, and his nicknames include "Mick" and "Mick the Stick." His high school nickname was "Bare-Butt Burton." He graduated from Radford High School in 1975.

Burton's badge number is 5085, and he is attached to the West Side Homicide Division of the Los Angeles Police Department. His immediate superior is Lieutenant Thomas Wesley, whose wife is named Helen.

SHADOW CHASERS

Pilot, Ahead of Time

Physical anthropologist Dr. Jonathan MacKensie was railroaded into investigating incidents of the paranormal by his department chair, Dr. Julianna Moorhouse. On his first case, he met tabloid reporter Edgar Benedek. Well-versed in the more sensational aspects of the paranormal, Benedek insinuated himself into this and other investigations, bringing in his own special brand of "specialists" to crack the case.

In the *Shadow Chasers* pilot, Jonathan MacKensie was sent to investigate evidence of hauntings in California. A firm non-believer, he was thrilled to meet Edgar Benedek while skulking around the graveyard where the supposed ghost's body is buried. Fully prepared to turn the investigation over to Benedek so he can get on with his "more important work" of anthropology, MacKensie was shot down in flames by Moorhouse, who was more than familiar with Benedek's brand of tabloid journalism.

It didn't take long for Jonathan to tire of Benedek's peccadillos, and when he asked Benedek just how he got into life on the weird side, Benedek explained that he was once engaged to be married, and his fiance had gone on a trip. On the day of her return, he had become convinced that her plane would crash, and had attempted to reach her before she left for the airport. Then, while waiting at the airport, he had known, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the person he was waiting for would never arrive. When Jonathan asked if this touching story is true, Benedek replied that it works great on talk shows, leaving MacKensie to wonder at the truth of it.

In the episode "Ahead of Time," a young woman materialized naked in MacKensie's shower stall, unnerving the nervous professor. She claimed to be a confederate of Benedek's and escaped from Jonathan. When she meets up with Benedek, she told him the truth — that she was from the future, a future where Benedek occupied the Moorhouse Chair of Georgetown Institute, and MacKensie was head of anthropology. Benedek's future self had been working on a time machine, which she used to get back to his present. Her aim was to stop a student of Jonathan's from starting the path that would eventually take him to the assassination of the President in her present, threatening the peace of her time. With the help of MacKensie and Benedek, she was about to change the course of history and return — reluctantly — to her own time.

Factoids — Shadow Chasers

Jonathan MacKensie's father, Dr. Leonard MacKensie, was a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, and served on the faculty of the Georgetown Institute. Although Jonathan obviously

remembers his father fondly, constant comparisons against his father's achievements grate on his nerves.

No less grating are the accomplishments of his "partner," Edgar Benedek. While not quite an award-winner, Benedek has a number of books in print on paranormal subjects, including several "quickie sequels" and sequels to "quickie sequels." Benedek has rather avante-garde taste in food, and usually has a combination of garlic and chocolate ice cream once a month to clear his spleen. In the episode "Amazing Grace," he was killed in a car accident but was brought back to life, with a tenuous connection to the spirit world. During his out-of-body experience while dead, he discovered that MacKensie had selected the rental car which resulted in his death because it was identical to the car in which he'd lost his virginity.

For more *Shadow Chasers* fiction, check out **Shadow Chasers Express**, **Prime Time** and **Crazy Quilt**, all published by Mary F. Wardell. SASE to her at 2104 SE 28th Place, Portland, OR 97214. Mary will also be reprinting some classic *Shadow Chasers* fanzines which have been out-of-print.

Also check out Mary Bloemker's fanzines, including **Maelstrom**, a *Shadow Chasers* trilogy written by Mary, and **Song of Shadows**, a *Shadow Chasers* novella edited by Mary. Send a SASE to Mary at 2655 6th Street NE, Birmingham, AL 35215-2707.

She-Wolf of London

Pilot ("She-Wolf of London"), What's Got Into Them?, Can't Keep a Dead Man Down (parts 1 and 2), Curiosity Killed the Cravitz, Habeas Corpses, Mystical Pizza.

When American graduate student Randi Wallace transferred from Los Angeles to London to study under her idol, Doctor Ian Matheson, research for her masters thesis took her to the moors, where she was attacked by a werewolf. On the next full moon, she found herself transforming into a werewolf herself. When she and Matheson attempted to track down the werewolf who infected her, he was killed, but the "curse" was not broken. Matheson, a firm believer in the non-existence of a true occult, found himself enmeshed in a world of the supernatural as he and Randi attempted to find a cure. When the University phased out Ian's department, and a friend of Randi's in Los Angeles was killed by trolls, Randi and Ian relocated to California. There Ian hosted a paranormal talk show on KBLA, *How Strange*, while he and Randi continued their search for a cure to Randi's monthly curse.

In the pilot, "She-Wolf of London," Randi arrived in London, joined Ian's class, went out to the moors to research her thesis, and was bitten by a werewolf. In "What's Got Into Them?" Professor John Mason was scheduled to deliver a speech at Ian's university and visited the Matheson Bed and Breakfast. The events of this visit are outlined in the opening paragraphs of **Sword of the Wolf**.

In "Can't Keep A Dead Man Down," *She-Wolf of London's* only two-parter, Ian's department chair, Dr. Samantha Stevens returned from her sabbatical to find Ian's new book, *Satan's Sex Slaves* (co-written with his Aunt Elsa) rising up the best-seller list. She told Ian that he would lose his position with the university if he did not reclaim every single copy of the book. In the meantime, dead men were rising from their graves, feasting on the flesh of the living. When a Hollywood studio representative, Charlie Bodine, showed up at the Matheson residence, supposedly to clinch the deal on the film rights to Ian's book, Randi was reunited with her ex-lover, the man she left California to get away from. As Randi and Ian argued over Charlie's true intentions, they were drawn into the mystery of the dead preying on the living. They waited in the graveyard for the dead to rise, and followed them into an underground crypt — a crypt where Dr. Stevens was using the Staff of Gilgamesh and two of its three golden lightning bolts to raise the dead. With two bolts fastened to the Staff, Stevens was able to raise the dead, but not to restore them to flesh; her plan was to retrieve the third bolt and rule the world through her army of the resurrected dead. Stevens commanded her decaying followers to destroy the intruders. Attempting to escape the hungry zombies, Ian and Randi upset a flame on the altar in front of Stevens, causing the crypt to go up in flames — the formaldehyde preservative used in the bodies of the zombies was highly flammable. Thinking Dr. Stevens dead, Ian prepared to take over the department. But Stevens was merely disfigured in the blaze, not killed, and she took her vengeance by killing Ian with a sacrificial knife. Randi came into Ian's office immediately after Stevens left, and Ian died in her arms.

At Ian's funeral, Randi became hysterical; it was the day of the full moon, and her only support was gone. Charlie, with the help of the Matheson family, drugged Randi's tea, and packed her off on a plane to California. On the approach to Los Angeles, Randi awoke to the agonies of her werewolf transformation, and raced to the bathroom, where she turned into a werewolf, and escaped into the cargo hold. With the cargo hold being ripped apart by some ravening beast, the plane landed with full security present. When the cargo hold was opened, a cat escaped. Then, the werewolf. Randi woke up the next day in a hanger, and worked her way back to England.

Back in England, and welcomed home to the Matheson's, Randi visited Ian's grave, placing a bouquet by the gravestone. After she left, a decaying hand reached up through the earth to grasp the flowers. Charlie Bodine followed her back to England, and by the time she got back to the Bed and Breakfast, he was again ensconced in the home. When Randi returned to her room, she found Ian — very dead, and rapidly decaying — outside her bedroom window. She promised to help him fight his curse, but his growing hunger for living flesh forced Ian to leave the house. He was taken by his fellow zombies to an abandoned church in the graveyard and Dr. Stevens. Destroying his will, she commanded him and a commando troupe of zombies to take the third lightning bolt, on exhibit at the British Museum.

Guessing that the bolt would be Stevens's next target, Randi took a job as a tour guide at the Gilgamesh exhibit, and she attempted to evacuate the exhibit room when the zombies attacked. When the security system was blown out by the zombies, she took the bolt and attempted to escape the museum with it. In the stairwell, she was captured by Ian, who nearly killed her.

Back in the church, Stevens used the newly-completed Staff of Gilgamesh to conduct a ceremony to give life back to the dead. Integral to the ceremony was the death of a sacrificial victim — Randi. Crying out the incantation, Stevens plunged the dagger into Randi, invoking the werewolf transformation. The lifeforce instead poured into Ian when he grasped the Staff, and Randi, as the werewolf, tore out Stevens' throat, then died. Ian captured Stevens' lifeforce in the Staff and redirected it to Randi. Then, smashing the Staff, he sent the dead men back to their graves.

Ian carried Randi back to the Matheson residence, where his reappearance caused his father to faint, and his mother to threaten to kill him if he ever did that again. Later, Ian held a press conference where he explained how he'd "gone undercover" to stop Stevens' insidious plot. Charlie Bodine negotiated a contract for Ian's life story with Ian's Aunt Elsa, and Ian began work on *Ian Stryker — Professor of Danger.*

In the second series episode "Curiosity Killed the Cravitz," Randi's friend discovered that trolls were living in the house next door. She called Randi in London in a panic, but the call was cut off when she was killed by the trolls. Randi insisted on returning to Los Angeles to look into her friend's death, and Ian decided to come with her. His reasons? Following up on the screenplay based on his book, *Ian Stryker — Professor of Danger.* And the university was phasing out the department of mythology.

In Los Angeles, Ian and Randi moved into her friend's house to spy on the neighbors, and soon found themselves captives of the trolls, along with the wizard who had turned them from gypsies into trolls a thousand years earlier. Before they escaped, Ian finally admitted that the reason he came with Randi to Los Angeles was the fact that he loved her. While in Los Angeles, Ian met with Skip Seville, his contact at Monumental Pictures, now station manager for a low-budget UHF station. Ian did a pilot for a paranormal talk show, *How Strange,* and convinced Randi to remain in Los Angeles, using the program as a way to track down the cure for her lycanthropy.

In "Habeas Corpses," Randi and Ian found themselves up against a law firm comprised of vampires. Discovering that the vampires were able to move around in the daylight because of very clever wax masks, Ian short-circuited the air-conditioning in the building to cause the masks to melt away, and the duo escaped. Back at the house Ian purchased (complete with a secret room to chain Randi in each month), Randi and Ian enjoyed a gourmet dinner prepared by Ian. Then, finally planning to consummate their love for each other, they discovered that not only the full moon will cause Randi to turn into a werewolf — passion will also trigger the metamorphosis.

In the final episode of the series, "Mystical Pizza," Ian and Randi battled three witches in their pizza restaurant, Three Maids from Salem. The three witches promised Randi they could concoct a cure for her, and began to make the magical pizza. Masquerading as a health inspector, Ian shut them down and forced them to eat the bespelled pizza they had made to turn a group of television executives into cockroaches. Analyzing the ingredients used in the magic pizzas, Ian created a magical pizza of his own, and eating the pizza caused both Randi and Ian to transform into rabbits. (And how they came to be human again is the subject of an entirely different story ...)

Factoids — She-Wolf of London

His brother's son, Julian, lives with Ian's parents and aunt at the Matheson Bed and Breakfast.

None of Ian's screenplays have been filmed, as the studio which owned them, Monumental Pictures, was bought out by the Japanese. He taught at the university in London for 10 years before the Mythology department was phased out and he left England for California. There, he is the host of *How Strange,* and the station manager is Skip Seville, his previous contact with Monumental Pictures.

Randi Wallace is a native of Los Angeles, California, and left the States for England when her live-in boyfriend, Charlie Bodine, left her. She enrolled in university in London to pursue her masters degree as well as to forget Charlie.

Aunt Elsa is Ian's mother's sister, and lives in the Matheson Bed and Breakfast, much to the displeasure of Ian's father. Aunt Elsa styles herself as the "moral censor" of the household, but is in fact a lusty old lady who likes young men in tight pants. One of her favorite actors is Adrian Zmed, whose autograph she requested when Ian and Randi left for California. A third sister, Gertrude, was killed by the Bogman in "The Bogman of Letchmoor Heath."

For more *She-Wolf of London* fiction, check out **CrosSignals #6,** which is fast going out of print. The issue includes two *She-Wolf of London* crossovers among other excellent fiction. SASE to **CrosSignals** agent Kathy Agel, 9-11 Ayres Court, Bayonne, NJ 07002-3510 for information. **The Manifest #1** also included *She-Wolf of London* fiction by L. C. Wells ("Poppies"), and more *She-Wolf of London* fiction is planned for **The Manifest #3.**

THE TOMORROW PEOPLE

There are no specific references to episodes of the series cited in the stories in this issue. See also this issue's "Curriculum Vitae" for general description of the series.

The X Files

Pilot, Conduit, Fallen Angel, Eve. See also this issue's "Curriculum Vitae" for a general description of the series, and "X-Facts" following the first and second *X-Files* stories in this issue, "Helt" and "Haunting Melody." (And no, we don't have a bias against *X-Files* stories that don't start with 'H'!)

In the pilot for *The X-Files*, Special Agent Dana Scully was assigned by Section Chief Scott Blevins (Violent Crimes) to partner with Fox "Spooky" Mulder, once a rising star in the FBI's firmament, who now devoted his time to unsolved cases known as "the X-files." Scully was a skeptic, and Blevins wanted her to evaluate the validity of the work done by Mulder. She was assigned to produce regular field reports on her work with Mulder.

Scully and Mulder's first case together was a series of unexplained deaths in Oregon, the last of which revealed strange marks and chemical traces in the victim. Together, they flew out to Oregon and initiated an exhumation of one of the other victims. The exhumation was interrupted by the local coroner, returning from vacation; he had performed the previous autopsies, but the autopsy performed by his temporary replacement was the one which identified the anomalies in the body. Mulder suspected that the regular coroner either failed to notice the anomalies, or chose to leave them unreported. When the body was exhumed, it proved to be wildly mutated, and Mulder insisted on a post-mortem performed by Scully, who was a medical doctor with forensic training. Scully found a strange metal device in the nasal cavity of the corpse, which she pocketed.

A conspiracy appeared to exist in the small Oregon town, and the immediate link between the victims was that they were all graduates of the same high school and had been friends. Three survivors of their group remained: one, the son of the police chief, was catatonic in a mental hospital; another was severely emotionally disturbed, also an inmate of the hospital; and the third was the daughter of the coroner. Scully and Mulder began to investigate the group, including the area of the forest where they'd last been together before the breakdowns and deaths began. Getting back to their motel, Scully noticed strange marks on her back, in roughly the same place as the other victims'. She rushed to Mulder's room and asked him to look at the marks; they are mosquito bites.

Unnerved by the experience, Scully remained in Mulder's room, talking. Mulder told her about how he became interested in the X-Files. When he was 12 years old, his sister had been abducted, and hypnotic regression therapy had revealed memories of an alien presence in the room he shared with her. Mulder was obsessed with finding clues to getting his sister back.

While out investigating leads on the case, Mulder and Scully came back to their motel, to find it in flames; all their evidence had been destroyed. Another victim, the young girl in the mental hospital, was killed, apparently hit by a car. They later learn that the corpse Scully studied had also disappeared. The daughter of the coroner showed up, begging for their protection; she was convinced that she would be the next victim. Taking her to a coffee shop, they listened to her story about how the deaths began, but her father interrupted and took her away.

Mulder figured out who was responsible for the deaths, and he and Scully returned to the forest. There, they found the young man from the hospital attempting to drag the coroner's daughter into the forest. Brilliant light filled the forest, as if from an extraterrestrial source. Mulder and the police chief stopped the boy, and he spoke for the first time in several years. Follow-up interrogation revealed that he had been abducted by aliens, and had been instructed to provide test subjects; when the tests failed, the aliens came back to destroy the specimens. He had been bringing his friends back to the aliens for destruction.

Scully and Mulder returned to Washington, and Scully provided her report to Blevins. The only surviving evidence is the metal object she removed from the corpse. She turned it over to Blevins, and he turned it over to his assistant, who placed it in an evidence warehouse in the Pentagon, in a clear plastic box containing similar devices.

In "Conduit," a teenaged girl disappeared near Lake Okabogee, and her mother, herself an abductee as a child, was convinced that her daughter was taken by aliens. Mulder learns of the case through a tabloid newspaper, and Blevins refused to authorize travel expenses. Blevins showed Scully the X-File Mulder had opened on his sister's abduction, and claimed that his interest in the case was purely personal. Scully insisted on learning more from Mulder, and he showed her newspaper clippings from the earlier UFO sighting — clippings which included eye-witness accounts from numerous people, including government and military sources. The clippings showed the name of the girl's mother, and Scully became convinced that the trip might be worthwhile.

Mulder and Scully's investigation revealed that a murder took place on the night of the disappearance, and another teenaged girl — a rival of the missing girl — was responsible. But no clues existed on the disappearance, and local police officials refused to expend energy investigating the case since the girl had a history of disappearances.

Mulder and Scully attempted to help the mother. Her young son was sitting in front of the television, frantically writing down ones and zeroes. He told Mulder that the numbers came from the television. Mulder sent some of the sheets in for analysis, which resulted in NSA involvement - the sheets include highly classified material. They arrested mother and child and ransacked the house for evidence of espionage. Further analysis demonstrated that the information transcribed by the boy was random, snippets of transmissions from many satellites — like switching channels. Although mother and

son were released, the mother refused to have anything further to do with Mulder and Scully.

Mulder was convinced that the boy was a conduit of some kind, picking up information and transcribing it. They tried to talk to the mother again, and found the house abandoned. Arranged on the floor of the living room were the sheets of numbers the boy had written out; from the upper level, the pattern of digits painted his sister's picture.

Mulder and Scully hurried out to the Lake Okabogee area, convinced that the mother and her son had gone looking for the missing girl. They found the mother in the forest, unable to keep up with her son. Mulder rushed after the boy, and saved him from being run over by motorcyclists. Scully called out to Mulder — they had found the girl.

After the girl was hospitalized, Mulder and Scully attempted to talk to her. She told them that she wasn't supposed to say anything about her experience, and her mother told them to leave the family alone — she had already been through the ridicule as a child, and she didn't want her children to go through it.

Scully and Mulder returned to Washington, where Scully listened to the tapes of Mulder's regression therapy. Mulder, meanwhile, visited a church, and the episode closed with him weeping over a photograph of him and his sister.

In "Fallen Angel," Mulder's mysterious government contact, "Deep Throat" (introduced in the episode of the same name) provided him with top secret information about a crash retrieval unit deployed in Townsend, Wisconsin, where a suspected UFO crash-landed. Mulder raced out to the site and snuck in, to be arrested by the crash retrieval team's leader. He spent a night in the brig, along with a man named Max Fennig, a member of NICAP — National Investigative Committee for Aerial Phenomena. Scully arrived the following morning, with orders to bring Mulder back to Washington; he was to appear before a disciplinary committee headed by Section Chief Joseph McGrath (Professional Responsibility). Max had already been released by the time Scully arrived.

Arriving back at Mulder's motel room, they found the room ransacked, and Max Fennig stuck in the bathroom window. They pulled him out and questioned him; he recognized Mulder from a photo in a trade magazine, and told him that his career with the X-Files had been followed avidly by NICAP through the Public Information Act — all his travel expenses were a matter of public record. He also pointed out that Mulder's pseudonym for his *Omni* article hadn't fooled them, which surprised Mulder, since he hadn't realized anybody was paying attention.

Fennig invited them both to his trailer, where he showed them high-tech monitoring equipment. He played back a tape made the night of the crash, a tape of local law and fire officials facing some unknown and incredibly powerful enemy. Scully noticed Fennig's drugs — some for epilepsy, some for psychosis. She was convinced that Max was a lunatic, but Mulder was intrigued.

A military conspiracy of silence was underway in the small town, and the widow of the first victim of the intruder was told she would lose all benefits if she talked. The local emergency doctor decided to tell them what little he knew because he hated fascism. Suddenly, the military rushed into the unit, with several men suffering from fifth and sixth degree burns from contact with the intruder. Scully was pressed into service to help the doctor, and Mulder was ordered out of the hospital.

Mulder visited Max in his trailer, to find the man in the throes of an epileptic fit. He helped to calm the man down, and noticed a strange triangular scar behind Max's ear. When Max came out of the fit, he learned that Max had been suffering from the disease since he had been 10, but it had been under drug control for about seven years. Max decided to take a nap to recover from the seizure, and Mulder returned to his motel room, where he studied photographs from UFO abduction victims showing the same type of scar he found on Max.

Scully returned to the motel room from a gruelling night in the emergency room, and urged Mulder to get ready to leave for Washington and his disciplinary hearing. He insisted that she take a look at Max and his scar, but when they got to the trailer, Max had disappeared, leaving a blood stain on the pillow.

Scully and Mulder followed what they thought was Max's trail, and found themselves in a maze of warehouses. Mulder went into the warehouse, and found Max suspended in mid-air, obviously in torment. Around the warehouses, the military had deployed sharpshooters, prepared to take the alien intruder they tracked to this location down. Suddenly a brilliant light filled the warehouse, and Mulder was the only target remaining.

Back in Washington, Scully gave her testimony to the committee, but was not permitted to give a statement. Then it was Mulder's turn; he was also not permitted to give evidence in his defense. The committee recommended for Mulder's dismissal, and for possible criminal charges to be brought for his interference in the crash retrieval. Deep Throat stopped the dismissal, telling McGrath that it was always better to keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.

In "Eve," two bizarre murders take place 3,000 miles apart, but at precisely the same time. Both victims were "exsanguinated," their blood removed by small puncture wounds in the jugular, the heart's pumping action providing the force to pump the blood out of the bodies. Scully and Mulder took on the case because of the strange similarity to cattle mutilations, but the case took on an even stranger cast when they discovered that the daughters of both victims were virtually identical. Tina Simmons, the daughter of the Connecticut victim, was abducted from the State child

welfare facility, and they feared that the second girl, Cindy Reardon of California, would also be kidnapped. They learned from Cindy's mother that she had been born through in vitro fertilization. Mulder staked out the house, waiting for the kidnapper, while Scully investigated the possibility that both girls were products of the same in vitro fertilization program.

Visiting the Luther Scapes Center for Reproductive Medicine, Scully learned that the two families had indeed both been in the program, and their physician was the same in both cases — a Dr. Sally Kendrick. The Center's head told her that Kendrick had been performing experiments on the fertilized ova in the lab, prior to implantation, and she was fired. Then she disappeared.

In the meantime, Mulder's contact, Deep Throat, provided Mulder with information on a genetic experiments conducted by the United States during the Cold War — the Litchfield Experiments. He provided Mulder and Scully access to the Whiting Institute for the Criminally Insane, where they were conducted to the cell of "Eve 6."

There they learn of the eight original Eves, all identical to Tina and Cindy, and their male counterparts, the Adams. Eve 7 escaped many years ago, and Eve 8 10 years later. Only Eve 6 remained — the Eves were prone to suicide, as well as considerably higher intelligence, physical strength and psychosis. Eve 6 had been in restraints for years because of an attack she had made on a guard.

Cindy Reardon was kidnapped by one of the older Eves, and Mulder and Scully were unable to stop her. They launched a search for the woman and child with local law enforcement officials. In the meantime, Eve 7, or Dr. Sally Kendrick, introduced the two girls to each other. She explained to them that with drug therapy, it was possible to curb the psychosis, which hadn't become evident in the Eves until around age 20. She had hoped that her experiments had eliminated the "Litchfield Flaws," but in fact, the psychosis and homicidal behavior became accelerated — Cindy and Tina, both age 8, had killed their fathers. Kendrick asked them how they knew about each other, and they tell her, "We just knew." Then, Sally Kendrick became ill — Tina and Cindy had poisoned her with foxglove they had cultivated, placing the distillation in Sally's soda. By the time Mulder and Scully arrived, they had staged an apparent escape by the remaining adult Eve, and claimed that Sally Kendrick had attempted to kill them.

Scully and Mulder took the girls with them to return Cindy to her home, and Tina to the Connecticut child welfare department. On the way, one of the girls asked to go to the bathroom, and Mulder pulled into a truck stop. While Scully and Mulder were in the bathrooms, one of the girls poured foxglove into their sodas. Mulder accidentally left his keys on the table in the truck stop, and had to return to retrieve them; when he did, he noticed a greenish fluid on the table. Tasting it, he realized that it was the sweet foxglove compound, and that the girls were the murderers, not Sally Kendrick.

He returned to the car and knocked Scully's drink out of her hands, but the girls had run away. They finally caught up with them, and the two eight-year-olds were incarcerated in the Whiting Institute.

An older woman entered the Institute, gave her identification and was passed through to the cell block containing Eve 6, Eve 9 and Eve 10. She was Eve 8, come to break the girls out of the prison. When she asked how they knew to expect her, they told her, "We just knew."

Factoids — The X-Files

Addresses:
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Beverly Hills, CA 90123

Chris Carter
Executive Producer
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20th Century Fox
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The Fox Network also has an Internet address to which you can E-mail your comment on the series. Charles Kennedy, Vice President of Programming Research, is the contact. The address is: **Foxnet@delphi.com.** If you send E-mail, indicate "X Files" in the subject line.

An *X-Files* fan club has been formed in New Hampshire. For information, send a SASE to "The X-Files" Fan Club, P.O. Box 3138, Nashua, NH 03061-3138.

An online *X-Files* fan club exists on America Online. To join, send E-Mail to FoxxMulder (FoxxMulder@aol.com on Internet).

For Internet users, there are several active *X-Files* groups (including rec.arts.tv.x-files and alt.tv.x-files), and an *X-Files* FAQ ("Frequently-Asked Questions") is compiled by and available from "Special Agent" Pat Gonzales via E-Mail at gonza006@maroon.tc.umn.edu.

Debbie Roberts at Hangar X Publishing is scheduled to publish an *X-Files* fanzine (**Project UXP**) for May 1994. For information, send her a SASE at 2419 N. Tejon Street, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80907 (note this is a new address as of May 1994).

And don't forget that **The Manifest** is looking for more material in *X-Files* and all the wonderful genres represented here!

You are receiving this zine because ...

____ I may be Seeing Things, but I'm not crazy.

____ You can't believe your eyes.

____ I'm dancing with stars in my eyes.

____ I'm looking through you.

____ I've got a crush on you.

____ Doctor McDee must die!

____ We need to have a long talk about your new career as a new car salesman.

____ You don't do Princess Di.

____ There was no time for subtlety.

____ You know we only tell long, bizarre stories over Szechuan.

____ You paid for it.

____ You contributed.

____ You *will* contribute.

____ Gee, we thought you liked us.

____ You don't understand Olympic figure skating judging either.

____ You love haunted houses, too.

____ You *did* take a P.K.E. reading ...

____ You call Mulder "Foxy," too.

____ Don't call us "Junior"!

____ It's about time someone with a little sense showed up around here.